

## Easter and the Real

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Sunday of the Resurrection  
Easter Day  
April 21, 2019

“But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” – Luke 24:11

Every pastor has to come to terms with Easter. It comes around, relentlessly, annually, and woe betide the preacher who waits until Easter Eve to write her Easter sermon. A Saturday night special will not do on the one day of the Christian year when people come to church full of expectation. They are expecting the paid expositor and expounder of the Christian faith to confront the reality of natural death and they are hoping and praying that the faith proves victorious. I'm here as living proof that it does and to reassure you, as I have for the past fifteen Easters that you neither hope nor pray in vain.

You and I start with reality – the really real, as some folks like to say – and we think we know what that is. It's Good Friday. It's death on the cross. It's goodness done in by the forces of evil that seem intractable, implacable, and irrational. That's the message of Good Friday: evil wins. Good Friday is the proof of Edmund Burke's famous warning that the only way for evil to win in the world is for enough good people to do nothing.

And where were the good people on Good Friday? Most of them, of course, were at home, minding their own business, as most of us do most of the time. They were going along to get along. Business-as-usual folk. Good Friday folk. That's us.

A handful of the good people, mainly women, crept and crouched and huddled in fear at the foot of the cross as the forces of the mighty Roman empire hammered its will – its so-called *pax Romana* – into the hands and feet of a teacher and healer from a backwater region of a backwater province on the eastern edge of the Romans' sprawling empire. They were the faithful ones, the ones who would stick it out to the very bitter end and be there to pick up the pieces.

But where were the others? Where were the other eleven nearest and dearest of the crucified one? Where was Peter the impetuous, James and John the ambitious, and Nathaniel the guileless? Where were they? Frightened, scattered, and hidden, that's where they were. Trying their best not to be identified with the one on the cross, trying to avoid punishment by association. Their male faces were nowhere to be seen in the face of the reality of Good Friday.

And that's the stage that reality sets for the birth of Christianity. When expectations are at their lowest, when hopes have been dashed, and when the best has been overcome by the worst, God appears as resurrected love, people are made new, and Christians are born and born again.

That's what happens on Easter day. The dead are restored to life, the bonds of trust and faith hold fast, and the conviction of undying, unconquerable, holy, and transcendent love is made real once again. The reality of Easter is that death and all its accouterments do not have the last word. The reality of Easter is that violence and all its terrors do not ultimately carry the day. The reality of Easter is that the new life in Christ, that the rabbi from Galilee promised, is more than a possibility – it is really, really, real. That's the reality of Easter.

Last Sunday in this sanctuary we had to endure a most dolorous program. At my insistence, it

was billed as a training session for the congregation in safety, security, and hospitality, and I insisted on that framing because I refused to privilege active shooters. I refused to privilege the violence that has made all of us, Christians and everyone else, cower in the face of unimaginably hurtful weapons in the hands of unmanageably unsettled people. You and I, in our go-along-to-get-along, business-as-usual way, have helped to create a world from which we now cower in fear. We lock doors. We install security cameras. We imagine how a hymn book might be weaponized. And we call that reality.

I call it evil. With St. Augustine, who described evil as the absence of goodness, I call it evil. I call that world broken, defective, and devoid of that love in which it was created and in which it is sustained by a loving creator. Allowing military-grade weapons to be taken up in the hands of the deranged – and who among us is not, at one time or another, angry or frightened enough to be deranged? – is no less evil than handing nails to the Roman soldiers to put down a preacher and miracle-worker as an insurrectionist. It is insanity beyond belief, and our descendants will stand as stupefied at our behavior as we stand stupefied at the behavior of the Nazis and the lynch mobs and the Klan.

Easter confronts that state of affairs and says no, that is not reality. Easter says such a world is defective reality, broken reality, damaged reality, insufficient reality, but not reality. We know this to be true at the center of our being. We have always known it to be true. We don't need weapons of mass destruction to show us how fallen this world is. People of faith have always known the difference between good and evil even as we have succumbed, time and again, to evil's temptations. Not the temptations that promise harm, but the temptations of half-truths, false security, and an accommodation to suffering as long as it's happening to somebody else.

If that's your reality, so be it. Choose broken reality, if you will. Choose death-dealing reality, if you wish to. Choose a reality that's less than the reality you can have, if that's what you're prepared to settle for.

But not for me. I believe that God has set before me and set before you and set before all of us the same choice that God set before those Israelites all those centuries ago when God was trying to convince them that they could indeed be a chosen, holy people of faith.

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse," God told the Israelites through Moses fourteen hundred years before Jesus. "Now choose life, that you and your descendants may live. Love the Lord your God, obey his voice, and cling to him, because he is your life!" (Dt. 30:19-20)

That's reality! Cling to the God who made this world good, sustains this world in love, and will redeem creation to its original goodness in ways we can't even begin to imagine. Cling to that God, listen to that God's voice, and allow that God to make you new. That's the reality that I choose, and I urge you to choose it, as well.

As many of you know, I'm a sucker for popular science – a carry-over, I reckon, from my undergraduate days as a biology major – and *National Geographic* reported recently that there are about 25 billion places in our galaxy alone that could support life, and our galaxy is only one of trillions of galaxies. Try to imagine how many worlds, in addition to our own small earth, that might mean there are out there where the God of the living is at work on some project that vaguely resembles our own? Among all those trillions of billions of planets and stars, what else might God be up to? You and I can't begin to grasp the magnitude of those possibilities, and if science soberly tells us about all of that that's unknown to us, who are we to say that resurrection isn't real, isn't possible, isn't true? We are just like those first followers of Jesus who considered the women's report of the resurrection an idle tale.

Evil comes in many forms, and last week we saw it in one of its natural forms attempting to lay

claim to one of the greatest monuments raised to the Christian faith. Fire is what it is; it's perfectly natural and has provided us with many benefits. But when fire is accidentally brought into contact with ancient wooden beams, as it was at Notre Dame last Monday, evil ensues. A masterpiece of human devotion, human skill, and human labor was severely damaged by no ill will but merely by the comingling of fire and dry wood. The loss is enormous.

But the loss is neither total nor final, and both funds and plans are already in hand to begin the process of rebuilding and restoring. Some of the building's greatest treasures appear to have survived largely intact – the grand organ, the most beautiful windows, the treasures of the reliquary – and many people are calling their survival a miracle. And it may be, but miracle or not, the power of love for what the cathedral means and has meant for countless believers and non-believers alike will raise Notre Dame to new life regardless of how long the project takes. God's love can inspire people to feats they never imagined possible, and Notre Dame will need that love in the coming years. And when its greatness is restored, no one will call our plans today an idle tale.

The work of the God in whom we believe is anything but an idle tale. We believe in a God who not only creates, but also re-creates, who raises up from ashes, who sets captives free, who breaks bonds of oppression, who creates and sustains in love, who promises a future for all creation redeemed and set free from bondage – that God is the God of the really real. That's the reality God has promised for all who believe.

But believe you must, and that's the crux of the matter this morning. Belief is what makes Easter Easter and not simply an idle tale. Belief is what distinguished Jesus' followers from his opponents. Belief is what allowed those believers to experience the risen Christ. Belief is what separates the sheep from the goats in this world – and in the world to come.

Easter does not make you believe; Easter confirms you in your belief. If you do not already believe in the way of the Christ, Easter will not get you there.

Matthew concludes his Gospel by saying that after his resurrection, Jesus instructed his eleven remaining disciples to go to a mountain in Galilee, where he appeared to them. “When they saw him,” Matthew reports, “they worshiped him. But some doubted” (28:17).

Some doubted. Even the resurrection cannot overcome a person's unwillingness to believe, and Jesus said as much in his parable about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man has died, he is in hell, and he asks father Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to the rich man's five brothers, so that they might repent of their selfishness before it's too late. But Abraham replies, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). Jesus was clearly referring to his own resurrection in that parable, and he was making the important point that resurrection is not the source of belief, it is the confirmation of belief. It is telling you and everyone who has chosen the path of justice, mercy, and peace – everything, in other words, found in Moses and the prophets and the Christ – that you have chosen rightly. You have made the right decision. You have made the right commitment. You have chosen what is lasting, durable, and eternally – as opposed to temporarily – real.

That is belief as a Christian practices it. And practice it you must. People sometimes say that Christians define themselves by correct belief – orthodoxy – whereas Jews define themselves by correct behavior – orthopraxy – and while those definitions may be convenient, they are also defective. It is impossible to be a Christian without being a practicing Christian. There is no such thing as a believing Christian who is not a practicing Christian. The faith of the followers of Jesus Christ is not a box of thoughts or a bag of tricks; it is a way of life grounded in the example of the one who said he came not

to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. And that law and those prophets are all about practice.

So this Easter day, like every celebration of the resurrection, is your day to choose the reality that you will make the reality of your life. Reality is not what happens to you; reality is what you choose to do with what happens to you. That's reality, and everybody has to make their own.

Will you make your reality the reality the world hands you, with its relentless barrage of bad news, of screaming headlines, and its philosophy of scarcity, competition, and violence? Or will you make your reality the reality of a love so powerful that even death itself cannot kill it? That's the reality with which Easter confronts us, and that's the reality that Easter offers us, if we'll choose it.

"Whosoever will," we used to sing in the Baptist church, "whosoever will may come" to the source of that reality and make it their own. You are invited, without exception, to come to the table of that crucified and risen love in a few minutes, and receive the gift of that love in the bread of heaven. There is no greater intimacy than eating, and when you have made the tokens of that love yours by eating, then go forth from this place to make the lifestyle of that love yours by living.

Easter is about the living, my friends, not about the dead. That was the angel's announcement to those first Christians and those first Christian evangelists, those women at the tomb: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

Why do we seek the living among the dead? Why do we seek the risen Jesus Christ among our death-dealing ways? Why do we expect God to do for us what we refuse to do for ourselves? Why do we cry out for God to save us from our own self-destructiveness?

Easter points us toward the real. It affirms what is already in us that is real. It helps us cling to what is fully real in the face of all the partial realities to which we naturally want to cling.

This is your day to let them go. Allow yourself the freedom in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ that enslaves us to nothing except God's holy and loving will. This is your day to wake up to the realization – no idle tale – that you can have this life or you can have something better. Wake up to Easter and start enjoying what is real.