

## He's alive today. And that *matters* to me!

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year C. April 11, 2010. (Text: John 20:19-31)

The gospel story we just heard, the account of Thomas's disbelief transformed into belief and worship, concludes with these familiar words: *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have LIFE in his name."*

Since last Sunday, a single question has been turning over in my mind: *"If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, if the story of his resurrection is true – as I believe it is – is that truth making a real difference in my life?"* If the gospel accounts of the empty tomb and the disciples' encounters with the Risen Lord are testimony to a historical reality – meaning that they are neither the product of over-heated imagination nor the record of a series of oddly coordinated hallucinations; if they are not wishful thinking, but facts as certain as this morning's sunrise and this evening's sunset – then what does that mean for my life? ...And, by extension, what does that mean for *your* life?

Do we say, *"OK. Sure, Jesus rose from the dead. That's very interesting, but what does that have to do with me?"* Tom Wright, the bishop of Durham in England, says that there are statements which are *"self-involving"* and there are statements which are NOT self-involving. (That is to say, there are statements that are personally meaningful to me right now, and there are statements which are mostly irrelevant to me right now.)

For example, I read in the paper this week the statement that a previously unknown species of giant lizard had been discovered on a Philippine island. That is interesting, and I don't doubt that it's true. But it is not exactly *"self-involving"* for me. But the statement that the Colorado Rockies are playing baseball at 1:00 this afternoon and the game is being broadcast on TV is very self-involving for me! —See what I mean?

And there are various levels of self-involving statements. Bishop Wright offers a very British kind of example. He says *"If, while walking down the street, I see a bus go by and say, 'I think that was the Number 10 bus,' the statement is only minimally self-involving. I don't want to go where the Number 10 bus goes, and even if I did, I would rather walk. On the other hand, if arriving breathless at the bus-stop on the way to an important appointment I look despairingly up the street at the back of a departing bus and say, 'I think that was the Number 10 bus!' – knowing that the next one won't come for another couple of hours and that there's no alternative means of arriving at my appointment on time – the statement not only involves me, it plunges me into gloom!"*

Bishop Wright then makes this telling point: One cannot say *"Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead"* with only minimal self-involvement. *"If it happened, it matters."* To *me*. The world is a different place from what it would be if the resurrection had not happened. A person who makes the statement, *"Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead"* is committed to living in a transformed world, in what the good bishop calls a *"newly envisioned universe of discourse, imagination, and action."* [N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, © 2003, p. 714.]

Here is why the question I mentioned has been stuck in my mind for a week. There are many of us here this morning, and there are many other Christians in churches all around this world on this Second Sunday of Easter who will stand up today and say the Nicene Creed, including the part that reads, ***"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God. . . For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by***

***the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.***

The question can legitimately be asked: Are we **CONSCIOUSLY** “self-involved” in this statement from the Creed? Or are we just in the habit of repeating this classic formulation of Christian doctrine on Sundays, whether it has personal significance for us or not?

What if we trimmed off the theological bits and just left the historic claim, just left this part: ***“I believe... Jesus Christ... was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again”***? In other words, what if we reduced this affirmation of Christian faith to an unadorned assertion that a man called Jesus was crucified by order of Pontius Pilate, died from that treatment, was buried, and on the third day rose bodily from death to life? —Would that make a difference in our “self-involvement”?

I whittle the creedal statement down to just this sentence because Jesus’ disciples had an unshakeable conviction that their Master had been raised from death to life. The gospel we read this morning is a record of just two of their experiences with the Risen Christ. His resurrection was treated by the young church as God’s “seal of approval” on everything Jesus had taught and done during his life. For them, it confirmed his identity as Son of God and Savior in a way nothing else ever could have done —neither miracles nor wise sayings nor anything else. Their belief that Jesus rose from the dead made all the difference in the world to them. It was self-involving to the *n<sup>th</sup>* degree! —But is that still true for us?

I read on the web this week a long piece written by an atheist writer. This enthusiastic promoter of godlessness asserts that, despite the high percentage of Americans who profess to believe in God, we are really living in a culture which is “functionally atheistic.” For this author, a “functional atheist” is anybody who behaves day-to-day as if there were no God, regardless of whatever religious beliefs that person may profess to have —not because the person is deliberately being dishonest, but because he doesn’t treat his professed ‘beliefs’ with seriousness.

Parker Palmer, the Quaker philosopher and educator, says, *“functional atheism [is] the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with us. This is the unconscious, unexamined conviction that if anything decent is going to happen here, **WE** are the ones who must make it happen – a conviction held even by people who talk a good game about God.”* Functional atheism is what happens when we Christians say we believe in Jesus, and yet — in our daily lives — we act mostly as if God isn’t there, or isn’t powerful, or isn’t paying attention, or doesn’t really care about us.

I don’t want to behave as a “functional atheist.” I want to behave as an *authentic believer*! My own faith is built on a deep conviction that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead by the power of God and is alive today and always. I’ve had enough personal experiences of his presence, his words and his power to persuade me of the historical credibility, the “hard reality,” of the resurrection stories we can read in the New Testament.

Jesus’ disciples regarded the resurrection of their Master as God’s seal of approval on all that he had said and done. The resurrection certifies for us that we can trust the promises of Jesus, the assurances of Jesus, and the guidance of Jesus. They were not just for people who lived long ago and far away, but for us. ...*For*

*us!* That means we can live, day by day, with utter confidence in the things he said and did. Our minds turn to his promises and his guidance again and again, keeping in mind that the One who said these things is alive today.

I am going to stop in a moment, but before I do, I just want to remind you of a very few key things that I believe Jesus wants us all to remember. He says these words to you and me. Never forget them.

- *Follow me.*
- *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*
- *Do not be afraid.*
- *Abide in my love.*
- *I am with you always, even to the end of the ages.*
- *Love one another as I have loved you.*
- *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*
- *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*
- *Do not worry about your life.*
- *Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.*
- *Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you.*
- *Everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened.*
- *Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?*
- *I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am there you may be also. And where I am going, you know, and the way you know.*
- *Peace I leave with you, my own peace I give to you. And I do not give in the way the world gives.*
- *As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*
- *In the world, you will have tribulation. But be of good courage; I have overcome the world.*
- *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*
- *Because I live, you too will live.*

Before his death and resurrection, Jesus did many things and said much more than these few words. But I am reminding you of these words so that you and I might believe that Jesus Christ is indeed the ever-living Son of God, and that through believing we might have life in his name. Alleluia!