

Happy Easter, by Daniel Kuhn X1090412
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ
Acts 10:34-43 and Mark 16:1-8, 12 April, 2009

The Piedmont of North Carolina is absolutely gorgeous during the springtime. I love driving streets of Elon and Burlington and seeing the pink of the magnolia, the white of the dogwood, and the purple of the lilac blossoms, the yellow of the daffodils and the red of the tulips, and the flaming pink and red of the azalea bushes. In the springtime, we smell once again the fragrance of newly-mown grass.

There is something about the message of new life that God gives us this time of year. This is the time of year Jews and Christians celebrate the freedom and promise of Passover. This is the time of year, this is the very day, Christians celebrate the new life of Easter. Easter is a day that gives us hope. No matter how long, cold and dreary the winter, spring is here and with it the promise of new life. No matter what pains and sorrows we are enduring, the empty tomb gives us a sign of a better future.

We heard the story of Easter as told by the evangelist, Mark. Mark is the first gospel: the earliest. As he relates it, three women went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. They got to the tomb, found the stone rolled away from the entrance, and were met by a young man who told them that the tomb was empty, and that Jesus would meet the disciples in Galilee. That was it. There are no resurrection appearances in this, the first and oldest gospel.

As time passed, each gospel expanded on resurrection appearances. Matthew has Jesus appearing to the disciples on a mountain in Galilee and sending them out to baptize all nations. Luke has Jesus appearing first to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, then to the whole group of disciples, and finally, he takes them all over the hill to Bethany and ascends into the heavens. John has Jesus appearing first to Mary Magdalene, then to the disciples locked in a room, then a week later to the disciples including Thomas, who missed out on the first week. Then, Jesus appeared to the disciples up in Galilee as he cooked them breakfast. There, he had a special conversation with Peter about feeding Jesus' sheep, and finally, a conversation with the writer of the gospel.

The gospel writers do not agree on resurrection appearances. I am led to question whether there was a physical or bodily resurrection. I am not sure that our Christian faith is dependent upon a physical or bodily resurrection.

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan point out the difference between history and parable. "To call the rolled-away stone, empty tomb, or Jesus' appearance in the upper room "history," means these things could have been photographed or videotaped." (Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, "Sunday.")

On the other hand, we can see these stories as parable. The models for this understanding are the parables of Jesus. The meanings of Jesus parables are not dependent upon whether or not they are historically factual. Jesus' parables are true. They are truthful and truth-filled independently of their factuality. Because Jesus told a story about a man beaten, robbed and left by the side of the road does not mean it had to be an incident that could have been caught on surveillance video. The truth is that an alien, an outsider, a person who follows another religion, is as capable of being as good a neighbor as is a lawyer or a priest. The truth is, our heavenly Father welcomes us with open arms whether or not an actual father welcomed his prodigal son back home.

The resurrection of Jesus is true, whether or not it is historical physical fact. Our faith in

Jesus Christ is not dependent upon a physical, bodily resurrection. There was a resurrection. That cannot be denied. The disciples, every one of them, was profoundly changed on that first Easter. In the resurrection stories, however, Jesus was not recognizable. Mary Magdelene did not recognize him at the tomb. At first, she thought he was the gardener. The disciples walking the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus as he walked and talked with them. The disciples, fishing on the lake of Galilee, did not realize that it was Jesus standing on the beach. The only way to explain these mis-recognitions is that Jesus' resurrection was spiritual. He was in a different form.

But, this resurrected Jesus changed the nature and character of the disciples. They were transformed. Now, they were able to realize the importance of all he had taught them and all that he did for others. The disciples became the church-- the body of Christ raised from the dead. They went out and told the whole world about Jesus and about the Kingdom of God here on earth. In the kingdom of God, all people have value, as opposed to the earthly kingdoms where value is given in dollar signs.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is the followers of Jesus. If Jesus does not live in you, in your actions and in your voice, then he has not been resurrected. If Jesus does live in you, then you will experience new life just as the grass grows with the spring rains. If Jesus lives in you, others will be able to see him in your colorful welcoming face and your fragrant compassionate actions. If Jesus lives in you, no sorrow will hold you down for long, for you will minister to others who are in sorrow.

The great sickness among those who call themselves Christian is to think that Jesus is my personal savior-- to think that Jesus died for me-- to think that Jesus gives me a free trip to a heavenly afterlife. As Matthew Fox stated, "We have to wake up the church. For too long, we've been sleeping on a sentimentalized Christ." (Matthew Fox, Living the Questions 2 Session 14, "Reclaiming the World" Chapter Three)

The resurrection of Jesus is for all of creation. Resurrection is always corporate and communal. Instead of focusing on what Jesus has done for me, we need to focus on what we are doing for Jesus. As Borg and Crossan say, "The political meaning of Good Friday and Easter sees the human problem as injustice and the solution as God's justice. (Borg and Crossan, The Last Week page 216.) If Christians are not leading resurrected lives, then Jesus is not resurrected. Jesus was sealed in a tomb, but the tomb could not hold him. His spirit broke through that cold stone. His spirit breaks through stone cold hearts.

This is Easter. Go out and enjoy the springtime weather. Celebrate the flowering and greening of God's creation. Dig some soil and plant a tomato, bean, or tulip. Go and hug someone who is shut-in. Go and telephone someone with whom you have had a strained relationship. Go and welcome an alien or a stranger. Go and hold a baby. "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:24)