

Montague Pastoral Charge

April 12, 2026 – Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

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If you have any scientific atheist friends, you may be familiar with the saying, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” The saying was made famous by Carl Sagan in the 1970s, but the idea is much older. It’s one of the basic values of modern science. If you make a really strange claim, your evidence needs to be that much stronger. If one person claims they saw a brown bear in the woods and another person claims they saw Bigfoot, it’s obvious that the person who claims they saw Bigfoot is going to need a stronger set of evidence before we can believe them. You’ll sometimes see a T-shirt or a poster with that heading at the top, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,” and then, below, a list of all the beliefs they think are extraordinary: astrology, homeopathy, mermaids, leprechauns, God, and of course, resurrection.

And to that one, rather than being offended, we should all say “Amen. When it comes to resurrection, Christians can be in perfect agreement with the atheists. It *is* an extraordinary claim, and it always was. The first person to hear about the resurrection and demand “extraordinary evidence” was not Carl Sagan, it was the disciple Thomas. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Thomas knew that this was an extraordinary claim. It’s good to remember that, because, whatever you believe about the resurrection, we have a tendency towards what G.K. Chesterton called “chronological snobbery.” Chronological snobbery is when look back in history and you say, “Here we are with electricity and the periodic table and the structure of DNA – we’re smarter now. Way back then they just didn’t know much about the world, so they believed wild stuff like this. We know better now. They could believe crazy things like walking on water and dead people coming back to life, but we just can’t believe that sort of thing anymore.”

But as soon as you start to think about it, you realise how silly our chronological snobbery is. As soon as you actually read some ancient literature, you realise that, no, people didn’t think walking on water was a normal thing to do, even back then. In the Roman world, people didn’t think their friends might come back from the grave and sit down for supper. If Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John thought that walking on water was just “par for the course,” they would not have written it down, because no one would have been impressed. If they thought they lived in a world where you could expect dead people to come back to life, they would not have made such a fuss about Easter. The whole point of miracles is that they are incredible – literally *in-credible*, impossible to believe. They don’t just demand extraordinary evidence: there really isn’t *any* evidence that could convince you that a miracle had happened. Miracles are impossible, by definition. They were preposterous then and they haven’t gotten any more or less preposterous since. So what does that mean for the resurrection? Whether we identify more with Carl Sagan or with Thomas, it comes to the same thing: we need evidence, but what evidence could possibly convince us of the impossible?

In the United Church, we tend not to read the Bible as literally as some Christians do, and for that reason we have folks under our tent from across the whole spectrum of beliefs. You don’t

have to check your beliefs with the Orthodoxy Police when you come in the front doors. When it comes to the resurrection, some of us may take the gospels at face value and believe quite confidently that there was an empty tomb and a risen body. Others may read the whole thing as a kind of metaphor, that it really wasn't about a body, but it's a way of talking about a spiritual truth. Maybe the disciples had a profound experience of grace and hope after Jesus died: some startling realisation of his ongoing spirit alive within them. Perhaps over the few decades before the gospels were written, as people told the story over and over, they came up with these Easter stories to give some grounds for their faith.

It's probably a good thing that we in the United Church don't have any Orthodoxy Police, and we have space for different interpretations. However, sometimes I wonder if the way we make room for different understandings is by simply not talking about the issue. If we say as little as we possibly can, no one can get offended. And so, much of the time, we find polite ways of not really saying what we believe or don't believe about Easter. We don't want to sound silly, perhaps, or we don't want to offend someone who believes differently.

If that's the case, then just for today I want to challenge us to try. What really happened to Jesus on the third day? To put it bluntly, do a little thought-experiment. Imagine that our livestreaming team at Hillcrest has able to send a video camera back in time 2000 years to the tomb where Jesus was laid, and they are going to broadcast a livestream back to us. We're all going to sit down together in those wee hours of Sunday morning and settle this once and for all. Enough dodging the question. What do you think we would see on the television screen? Was it all a misunderstanding? A big hoax? Or was it the real thing?

Over the years, there have been plenty of alternate explanations for the empty tomb. The oldest and simplest is grave robbery. That was not at all uncommon in those days, and if you were going to rob a grave, you would want to do it quickly, before the body started to smell and before anyone else had a chance to get there first. So maybe the body was just stolen. On the other hand, the Gospel of John has that interesting detail about how the clothes Jesus was wearing were left in the tomb, in two little piles, and that's a point against the grave-robbery case. Grave robbers might take the clothes and leave the body, but they wouldn't take the body and leave the clothes.

Another old theory is that Jesus wasn't actually dead; he had just fainted and was buried alive. Perhaps he came to while he was in the tomb and was able to force his way out. But that's a stretch. Roman soldiers were pretty good at killing people, after all. That was their specialty. Another rather unglamorous theory is that the women simply came to the wrong tomb, and when the supposed angel said "Look, he is not here," he was actually pointing them down the way to the real tomb. But again, I don't find that one very convincing either. How dumb do we think the women were? And would no one have followed up afterwards?

In any case, even if you can explain the empty tomb as a robbery or an accident or a sheer fiction that the disciples made up, that's only one part of the story – it's only the negative sign of the resurrection, so to speak. The more important part of the story is the *positive* one: the claims that people actually met Jesus alive again.

The first surviving gospel was probably written around 70 AD, 40 years after Jesus' death. But the earliest claim we have about the resurrection comes not from the gospels but from the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians, and that was probably written around the year 55. In Chapter

15, Paul gives a kind of official statement of the resurrection tradition that the disciples had told him: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” It’s a fascinating passage, because he mentions resurrection stories that we don’t hear about in the gospels: to James and to 500 people at once. We’d love to know more about those stories, but unfortunately that’s all we get.

But notice how Paul doesn’t even mention the empty tomb, or the women who went there. You might take this to be evidence that Paul never heard the story, or that he didn’t think the body really mattered; maybe that wasn’t what he meant by resurrection. But it could also be that he knew the story of the empty tomb and he just didn’t think it was worth mentioning, because he knew that it wouldn’t have convinced anyone. In that culture, women were not considered to be reliable witnesses. If you were going to make up a credible story about a resurrection, you would not have had women be the first witnesses. And you certainly would not have highlighted how confused and terrified these women were when they saw what they thought they saw.

And that leads to the final point, which is that, when you read the Easter stories, it’s clear that whatever happened, no one seems to have expected it. Even a few decades later, the Gospel writers have a hard time handling it. Notice how different it is from the story of the crucifixion. There, the gospels are constantly quoting the Old Testament. “This happened to fulfil the scripture...” Because from a very early stage, Christians were making sense of the cross by thinking of it through theologically, through the lens of their scriptures. But as soon as you come to Easter morning, there’s none of that. There are no quotations, no theology to explain why this had been bound to happen. Instead, you get a sense of sheer disorientation, as if the authors, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke, were still struggling to make sense of it, 40 years on. The Easter stories are strange and clunky. People are scared, they don’t recognise Jesus, and we’re never told why they don’t. As Karl Barth puts it, “human language begins to stammer at this point.” Again, if early Christians had simply made the story up, you wouldn’t have expected that; you would have expected the resurrection to be slotted nicely into the framework of their story and their theology.

Of course, none of that proves that there was a risen Jesus in the flesh on Easter morning. We could never prove something like that. You can’t send Inspector Poirot back in time to do a forensic investigation, interrogate all the witnesses and look for clues. We just don’t have that kind of evidence. What we do have is the evidence of the church: that a community of people believed so strongly that their teacher was alive that they would go on to share that belief all through the world. In many cases, they were prepared to die because of what they believed had happened. Whether they were right or wrong, they were convinced that something earth-shattering and unexpected had happened, and their whole worldview had to be reshaped around it. All we can do is to ask: What could have happened to give birth to that kind of community, with that kind of belief? And are there any better explanations than the one that community wrote down and passed on to us?

So what about our livestream camera? Does that mean we're still dodging the question? Come on now: what would we see if we were watching the live broadcast from Jesus' tomb? Well, some of us would answer that question one way, others another; I'm not going to ask for a show of hands. What must be said is this, and this a sobering thought: whatever we would see through that time-travelling video camera, we can be certain that it would *not* make believers of us. Not that we wouldn't see something, but faith doesn't work like that. You can't be a neutral observer here, weighing the evidence and then deciding whether it is extraordinary enough. You can't just sit there with a bag of popcorn in one hand and a pen and clipboard in the other, study the risen Christ like so much footage of Bigfoot, and then conclude whether you believe or not. He is never an *object* like that; he's always the *subject* of his story. He's never not the conclusion of our faith; he's the author of our faith. Go back and read Matthew's Easter story, and pay attention to the guards at the tomb. They see everything: the earthquake, the stone rolled back, the shining angel – and yet they don't believe. That should keep us humble. In all the resurrection stories, it is only Jesus who reveals himself to the disciples. They don't go out looking for proof; their doors are bolted shut. He is the one who breaks in.

We can go on debating the history of the first Easter – it's fascinating and it's fun – but that's not where you meet the risen Christ. You meet him like Thomas and the others, or like the disciples at Emmaus, in the community of his people, in the breaking of the bread. This is the evidence, right here. Here we are, breaking this bread, passing this cup. How did we get here?