

Tom Coop
John 20:1-18
April 16, 2017 *EASTER*

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE!

I read a story about a man named Mark, who has a four-year old daughter, named Elena.

In it, he talked about his conversations with Elena as Easter approached in which he struggled to get through to four-year old Elena the meaning of Easter.

It went something like this:

"Daddy, will the Easter bunny bring me purple jelly beans?"

I am sure he will bring you jelly beans, Elena. But, remember, Easter isn't about the bunny. It's about Jesus.

"But will they be purple?"

Yes, honey, I am sure there will be some purple ones in there. Honey, the important thing about Easter isn't the bunny. Easter is about how much Jesus loves you and me and the whole world.

"Daddy, HOW MANY purple jelly beans will the Easter Bunny bring me?"

Elena, I think he will probably bring plenty of purple jellybeans. Do you know how much Jesus loves you?

"Daddy..."

Yes Elena?

"Will he bring me tootsie rolls too?"

You see, for a four-year old, Easter bunnies and purple jelly beans and tootsie rolls are just way more interesting than JESUS, and they gave her something to look forward to, and in the end, are enough to make Easter fun.

And fun is, for a four old, enough!

Although Easter hasn't gotten to the point of having as many consumer and cultural distractions as Christmas, sometimes it's the same way for adults.

Lilies and new clothes and family visits and Easter dinner preparations consume our attention.

Showing up for worship on Easter Sunday for some of us is just part of the gig, and many come expecting little more than candy-coated clichés.

But my guess is that, unless you're four, those of you who have gathered here this morning are looking for something beyond candy-coated clichés added to the assortment of jellybeans we consume on this day.

And, I have to believe, that is why we have come to worship on this day. We want to know something of what Mark was trying to get through to Elena.

That although life will not be all jelly beans and tootsie rolls, and that for sure it will include death and pain and heartache ... the resurrection and love of Jesus can make all the difference.

Maybe on this Easter you can relate to the men in our text who came to the tomb after Mary's announcement that the tomb was empty. And didn't get it.

You have followed others to church but, still, you just don't understand. You just don't see the proof for such claims.

That there is more than just this life. That the Jesus you read about and worship is really alive and even living in your heart.

That would be just too good to be true, right?

Maybe it is. After all, Easter is the celebration of one of the most absurd claims in history: that Jesus of Nazareth was seen alive again after dying on a Roman cross.

It's an absurd claim, because, if there is one thing life teaches us human beings, it's that dead people stay dead, never to be heard from again.

Yet for 2,000 years, the resurrection has been one of the foundational teachings of Christianity.

As the apostle Paul put it, if Jesus was not raised to life then the Christian faith is "futile" and Christians are "of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor 15: 16, 19)." A little strong, I think, BUT if Jesus wasn't resurrected, he'd be just a good teacher, not someone who could sustain a movement for 2000 years!

To be sure, that first Easter Sunday morning was, a time for grief and reflection.

Peter was heavy-hearted; John was grieving; as was Mary, Christ's Mother.

The other apostles had fled. Judas had realized what a crime he had committed and killed himself. What a gloomy night!

They had followed a man named Jesus. They had come to know him as someone special, someone unique.

They believed he was the Messiah, the one who would come to save Israel, but they were still unsure what that really meant.

There was certainly nothing militaristic about him. It would be strange indeed to hear someone who's getting ready to lead a revolt against Rome say something like "love your enemies."

Yet, we know he wasn't a wimp. No wimp could have driven the tax-collectors out of the temple.

No wimp, in the midst of his terrible suffering, would have forgiven those who had put him on the cross. He was a man not given to vengeance nor to violence.

More than anything else he was a man of peace. He even spoke peace to the angry waves on the sea. He was a man of healing and acceptance and love.

But, now he was gone. Crucified . . . dead . . . buried.

That's the reality that confronted his followers on that first Easter Sunday morning.

In our text, we read that Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb on the third day after his death and finds the stone rolled away and his body gone.

She is confused and is afraid. What is going on here? Who's playing these tricks?

When we were first introduced to algebra in high school, we learned a theorem called, "The Transitive Law of Property."

It went like this: "If A is greater than B and B is greater than C, then A is greater than C."

You can imagine the various applications. Using the Transitive Law of Property, you can prove all sorts of things.

One, not in the textbook, was this:

Did you know that peanuts are better than ice cream? It's true. Peanuts are better than nothing. And nothing's better than ice cream.

Therefore, peanuts are better than ice cream.

Sounds logical, doesn't it? And it is, only it's not necessarily true. Whether or not peanuts are better than ice cream is a matter of personal taste. There's no proving it, one way or the other.

Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb, but it didn't prove a thing, and it certainly didn't transform her life. At least, not yet.

As the story goes, Mary ran to tell Peter and John, and they raced to the tomb to see for themselves.

Sure enough, just as she'd said, the stone had been rolled away, and the body was gone. I can just imagine them standing there scratching their heads, wondering what had happened.

Our scripture text says, "For as yet they didn't know the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. So the disciples went away again to their own homes."

In other words, they went back still confused. "No body, wonder what that could mean?"

The text goes on to say that Mary crying, looks into the tomb, and sees two angels who ask her why she was crying.

Of course, she tells them that the body of Jesus is gone.

In the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – the angels offer a stirring testimony.

According to Luke, they said:

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He isn't here, but is risen.

"Remember what he told you when he was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered up into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again?"

How about that? I mean, what more could you want? If you can't believe the angels, who can you believe?

Yet, there's nothing in the text to suggest that Mary is convinced, one way or the other. To this point, she has yet to experience the resurrection.

And the truth is, even for us today, just hearing it from others, rarely is enough.

The faith of our fathers and mothers and neighbors and friends is important, but it's rarely enough.

In his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner talks about the importance of the community of faith.

He tells the story of Harry Golden, who once asked his father, "If you don't believe in God, why do you go to synagogue so regularly?"

His father answered, "Jews go to synagogue for all sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkle, who is Orthodox, goes to talk to God. I go to talk to Garfinkle."

Fair enough. There's nothing wrong with going to church to talk to each other. Christian fellowship is at the heart of a life of faith.

But, we know that fellowship alone is not enough. Belief in the Risen Christ doesn't come vicariously, one gleaning from the experience of others.

It doesn't come by sitting next to someone who's religious. Although both are certainly helpful.

It comes by a personal encounter with the living Christ.

And this is what happened to Mary. Mary turns and sees what she took to be the gardener standing behind her.

But it is Jesus and as soon as she hears him say her name, she knows it is him! And later that day, so do the disciples.

It's an amazing story. Jesus' followers go from despair to astounding joy all within the bounds of a single day.

But ... if you think it was all a sham, that his disciples hadn't really seen the risen Christ, that is was just hopeful thinking, how do you explain what happens post-resurrection?

There is a dramatic change that takes place in the life of the disciples after that first Easter.

Nearly all of them re eventually martyred, most of them suffered over and over and over. But, their faith never wavered.

Why? Well, for one, they knew that a resurrected Jesus meant that he was who he claimed to be.

Nobody in the history of the world had ever come back from the dead and stayed that way. To them it proved that he was divine.

The resurrection also revealed Christ's power over death. Christ is described as the *first fruits* of the resurrection from the dead, meaning that his resurrection is a precursor to the resurrection that all believers.

1 Corinthians 15:21-22 explains, "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

Christ has made the journey from this world to the next and he has returned to tell us that the journey is safe.

And that a loving Father is waiting on the other side to welcome us with the gift of eternal life.

A great truth in life is this: Deep down, the human spirit yearns for joy, yearns to soar.

And then life gets in the way--key ingredients go missing--and over time our spirits sink and become flat and heavy and bleak.

For everyone out there who feels that their dreams have been destroyed, their hopes dashed, their spirits crushed, here is the good news of Easter morning:

The risen Christ can take our flat, heavy hearts and put back that key ingredient...

...so that our spirits are not stuck on the ground,

...so that our spirits are not dictated by human pain or loss or disappointment,

...so that our spirits are not mired in a tomb.

Easter brings each of us a second chance. A chance to see the life force in our midst. A chance to recognize the risen Christ right in front of us. A chance to start again.

And that is a reason for abundant joy! The proclamation of that joy began this morning somewhere in New Zealand with the pealing of church bells.

Then it was carried by jubilant voices raised by millions of believers in Asia and Africa.

Then it swept across the great cathedrals of Europe and now we, here in North and South America, join our voices and the joyful news of Easter sounds deep and full and wondrous over all the world.

He is alive.

When the stone was rolled away, and the earth shook, we got our first glimpse of a new world, a world where death doesn't have the last word.

Author John Bunyan understood that. Bunyan, a Baptist, was imprisoned in England in the 17th century. His crime was that he refused to sign a document affirming the Church of England's statement of faith.

While in prison, he wrote the classic allegory, "Pilgrim's Progress," regarded by scholars as one of the most significant works of religious English literature.

In one beautiful passage, *Christian* and his traveling companion *Hopeful* are awaiting certain death in *Doubting Castle*.

Many of us have been imprisoned in *Doubting Castle*, at one time or another, haven't we?

Well, *Christian* and *Hopeful* are praying through the night, when all at once *Christian* sees the light of Easter break forth in his heart.

Here is how he responds to that light:

"What a fool am I . . . to lie in a stinking dungeon when I may as well walk to liberty. I have a key in my bosom called *Promise* that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in *Doubting Castle*."

And so, it did just that for *Christian* and *Hopeful*.

That key is God's promise that the demons of hell could never defeat them.

You and I have that key as well. Why would we be content to lie in a stinking dungeon when we can walk into liberty as children of the resurrection?

Death, my friends, has been conquered. We are free to live and love with the knowledge that whatever happens, life and love extend beyond the grave.

Because he lives, we can live, victoriously, freely, and without fear.

That is why around this globe this day, above all days, bells are ringing and choirs are singing. He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Amen...