

Easter Day 2018 Sermon

Pastor Matt Fitzgerald tells of a particular Easter Sunday when his daughter was in kindergarten. The church had given her and “each of her Sunday school classmates purple plastic Easter eggs to take home. The eggs contained a slip of paper. [Now, Pastor Fitzgerald’s daughter] was right in the midst of learning how to read, so she seized on the paper’s monosyllabic words as eagerly as if they were jellybeans. She read with confidence. ‘He is . . .’ Then she paused, carefully considering both syllables in the third word. ‘He is . . . raisins?’”

Matt Fitzgerald sees in his daughter’s mistake a helpful insight into how we understand – and *don’t* understand – Easter. “‘He is raisins’ is illogical,” Pastor Fitzgerald states. “‘He is risen’ is merely incomprehensible. When [we] speak about God [we] must distinguish between things that do not make sense and things that **we** cannot make sense of. Easter falls in the latter category.”¹

Those of you who have heard me preach Easter sermons over the past 20 years know that I – like most Christian preachers, I imagine – have often tried to make sense of Easter. After all, wasn’t that what I had gone to seminary to do – learn persuasive arguments so that I could convince my parishioners that Jesus really did rise from the grave? Help people make sense of it all?

But I now realize that Easter isn’t something we can wrap our heads around, make sense of. If we look at the Gospel accounts of the first witnesses to the resurrection, we see that **they** couldn’t wrap *their* heads around it either. They weren’t convinced by the message of an angel at the tomb saying that Jesus had been raised. The other disciples weren’t persuaded by the reports of the women who had been to the tomb. Thomas didn’t believe the testimony of his fellow disciples, whom he knew and trusted.

Those first Christians didn’t come to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead because of the testimony of angels or the other disciples. They didn’t come to believe because it made sense; quite the contrary! New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says that their early witnessing to others was something like, “I know this sounds ridiculous, but it’s what happened.”² They came to believe, **not** because they could make sense of it, but because they *experienced* Jesus as being **alive** *after* he had died.

And in the end, my friends, that’s the *only* thing that’s going to convince any of us. The 20th-Century German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: “Christ did not come into this world so that we might *understand* him, but that we might cling to him in order to be caught up in the immense event of resurrection.”¹ To be caught up in the immense event of resurrection! Christianity spread so quickly after Easter because **others** experienced the immense event of resurrection *in*

Jesus' followers, the earliest witnesses, who had been changed by their experience of the risen Christ and now, themselves, lived resurrected lives.

And that, my friends, is why you are here this morning: you believe, at *some* level of your being, that you can, in some indescribable and incomprehensible way, be caught up in the immense event of resurrection!

But there may still be that part of you that hesitates. There's some obstacle there that keeps you from allowing yourself to be caught up in the full power of Easter. What is it?

Perhaps our greatest **obstacle** to being caught up in resurrected Life is that we try to make **sense** of Easter, reason it out, explain it. Easter is not *illogical*, but it **is** incomprehensible; and the sooner we can accept that, and be **OK** with that, the easier it will be to get caught up in the immense event of resurrection, and to be *changed*, transformed into the likeness of Christ.

But it is that very aspect of *change* that is perhaps our **second** greatest obstacle to embracing Easter. For as Mark Twain said, the only human being who enjoys change is a wet baby. We resist getting caught up in the immense event of the resurrection because, as much as we may be **drawn** to it, we don't *want* to be **changed**! Our lives may be messy, but at least they are *familiar*, and therefore, to some extent, comfortable. Yet, looking at those early followers of Jesus who had experienced him as alive after his death, we see how their lives were **transformed** from being unsure, fearful, and self-focused to being so caught up in the immense event of the resurrection that they became bold, fearless, and filled with joy and the love of others! As St. Paul wrote, "... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17)

Everything – for the immense event of the resurrection isn't limited to us human beings. We see it all around us, woven into the very fabric of Creation. "Whoever tied Easter to the spring equinox made a very good decision," writes author Barbara Brown Taylor. "For those who are so inclined, there is no better time for feeling alive, as the whole world wakes from winter and makes new birth look easy. Clumps of green grass erupt from the flat tan lawn. Bluebirds appear on the clothesline. There are so many redbuds in the woods that a pink haze seems to waft through the trees. I may have blood instead of sap, but *something* inside me **rises** once the earth rounds the winter bend and heads back in the sun's direction.

"This time of year, my *body* knows things that my mind has not yet grasped."³

Our bodies know things our minds have not yet grasped. If we take a deep breath and then slowly let it out, we can feel it: the immense event of the resurrection all around us! Outside, trees budding, flowers blooming, the air warming, the birds

returning. And we can feel it right here, in this room, also: that *something* rising inside like the sap, the vision of flowers all around us – on the altar, in the windowsills; the taste of a delicious brunch lingering on our tongues, the holy scent of incense, the soaring hymns, our fellow worshippers all around – toward whom we feel a strange, warm fondness on this day, whether we know them or not.

Do we understand it? No. But do we believe it to be true? Without a doubt; for we have experienced it. He is risen – in you, in me, in our neighbors, in creation. We *know* it, not because we can make sense of it, but because we experience it.

And we can therefore proclaim: The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

AMEN

1 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-03/thunderous-yes>

2 *Wall Street Journal*, “The Easter Effect and How it Changed the World,” George Weigel, March 30, 2018

3 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2005-04/practicing-incarnation>