

*The Second Sunday of Easter*  
*Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

*April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour*  
*Mill Valley, California*

***What Kind of Faith will we Have?***  
***by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector***

Every Second Sunday of Easter, we hear once again this passage from the Gospel According to John: a passage known for the second and third appearances of the Risen Christ to the Jesus' followers – the first, in case you've been counting, was to Mary Magdalene in the garden outside the tomb. A passage known for a strange manner of Christ's appearing – of Jesus somehow and mysteriously being no longer blocked by shut and locked doors. Of a risen body as strange as inspiring – of marks in the flesh that hold evidence of the crucifixion, and yet somehow different from the flesh and blood we know.

For us living in the West in the twenty-first century, this story about the Risen Christ is as strange as it is tantalizing. Our understanding of the human person, of biology, anthropology and even cosmology are so radically different from that of the apostles and the author of John that the Resurrection narratives of Scripture can risk getting lost to us in a sea of cultural translation.

One of the great counterpoints for me this past Holy Week and Easter is in the midst of the great Christian mystery of salvation, the heart of our faith, I've been reading Brian Greene's *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, a pre-eminent and popularizing physicist's follow-up to *The Elegant Universe*, which was a Pulitzer Prize Finalist. Through Brian Greene's words, I have been reading about the great scientific minds of the Enlightenment up to and through the twentieth century – from Isaac Newton to Albert Einstein to the foundation of quantum mechanics, the discovery of a runaway expansion in the universe, to the likes of Heisenberg and particle accelerators, quarks, strings, and inflationary Big Bang theories. Greene's enthusiasm leaps off page after page as he makes some of the most arcane and highly technical aspects of his vocation accessible, yet intellectually stimulating, to the average reader. But, of course, he makes little or absolutely no reference to God or Christ – probably for a number of very sensible reasons.

And so while reading this I was, of course, turning regularly to the familiar (to us Christians) central stories written and experienced at a time when God was believed to dwell beyond the dome of the sky, the earth was thought by many flat and bounded by the sea, and spirits good and evil dwelt if not in every corner then at least in the wilderness, near at hand.

And then, as part of my vocation as priest and my faith as Christian I was called to proclaim Christ both publicly and privately as "Savior," "Risen" and "Son of God." Like a love sonnet that seems to be playing a different tune dissonant with that of our scientific world – a language and a worldview that attempts to define all things with clarity of formula or probability more than with placing faith in mystery.

It's a conundrum I've held off until Easter, quite frankly. Maybe, to be honest, because I was holding out hope that Easter this year – unlike previous years – would reveal something startling and utterly profound that would solve the tension we all hold to a greater or lesser degree inside: a tension between the "seeing is believing. . .and even then. . ." of our contemporary society, and a faith rooted in a thoroughgoing notion of God's omnipresence and transcendence – where nothing matters outside of God's gracious will

– the faith of so many of our ancestors. In all honesty I stand before you on the second Sunday of Easter a bit disappointed. No great insights. I haven't been struck by lightning.

Well. . .at least not yet.

Faith in our time can be a confusing matrix of conflicting opinion and world views. It is tempting on one side to engage in blind belief – to shut off our contemporary mindsets at the entrance to the Church or before we crack open the Bible or before we pray – something we often catch ourselves frowning on when we hear it articulated in various ways by some of our sisters and brothers. It is tempting on the other side to engage in a thoroughgoing skepticism that can range into agnosticism, where we risk believing next to nothing and potentially leading a life of confused, individualistic indifference. Some have accused the West of such an impoverished spirituality – if it can be called that – and it is hard to counter them. Surely don't want a faith devoid of intellectual rigor nor so lukewarm that it would have no meaning or power in our lives.

But thankfully, we have today's Gospel. I say thankfully because it does not necessarily demand belief or certitude about any particular kind of cosmology or adopting any particular cultural viewpoint in any thoroughgoing way. It does not demand Christ having a *particular* kind of resurrected biological body that we could discover by parsing the language of the text itself, let alone imagining scientists taking measurements or Jesus recounting what precisely happened at 12:01 a.m. on Easter Morning. The appearance in John's Gospel narrative only hints at something unusual, transcendent, and divine, and leaves it there. With hints. With mystery. The nature, in the precise language of today's science, of Christ's body is not the heart of the passage.

The Risen Christ comes to his followers not with some kind of description of Resurrection or expectations around a mathematically justifiable principle to define himself. He doesn't even demand belief in particulars about his body but instead simply utters, "Peace be with you." *Shalom*.

The disciples like us had their own internal conflicts between worldviews and what would happen next for them regarding their faith. More pressing was what to do about the religious authorities who might be out to get them, too. For the community in which John's Gospel was written, the conflict was about how to move forward with being faithful when the Christian community had become anti-societal in a broader Jewish context – when their Jewish roots were being cut off from both within and without. Where their identity was in crisis.

In some ways, so is ours. We are like them.

And Jesus says, "Peace be with you." He breathes on his followers and commends them to the ministry of reconciliation.

It is Thomas who is most recognizable to us living in the skeptical age that we do. . .an age that demands evidence. But he is not offered the evidence of the Risen Christ until he is with the others in community again. And Thomas, when he proclaims, "My Lord and my God!" upon seeing the Risen flesh of Christ, is only gently chided by Jesus, who reminds him that the greatest blessing falls upon us who believe but have not seen with our own eyes – at least not in the narrow way Thomas had.

Which, quite frankly, is most frustrating for us in a post-Christian culture, where proof is often demanded and cynicism abounds. Our faith is too much like Thomas' at times. We want God, Christ, and Resurrection on our own terms – perhaps even mathematically and scientifically bounded so we can be certain.

But God knows us better than that. Thomas might have been convinced for a while at seeing and touching the wounds of Christ, but would that have put an end to the questions later on? And what kind of witness could he offer when presented with a simple assertion that perhaps he was delusional, as we, even as Christians, would probably regard most people who talk about meeting the dead, or touching resurrected bodies? Thomas demanded evidence, but the Risen Christ was not so interested in evidence as Thomas or we might be.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not free to live into the joy of the Resurrection until we begin to see beyond our narrow intellectual constructs of what is true and what isn't. We will not grasp the full joy of Resurrection, until we begin to understand faith not as offering blind assent, but living deeply into relationship. Until we begin to understand belief as more than provable hypotheses or defended theory. Until we begin to understand belief instead as following in a Way where conquering death and fear involves entering the conflicted parts of our lives and communities and reclaiming the Risen Christ's simple words to his followers: "Peace be with you." *Shalom*.

I have yet to have the pleasure of meeting or hearing Brian Greene in person – I hope some day that I might – but based on what I've read of him, I would venture that even he would argue that he works on truth of a particular kind – rooted in mathematics, empirical evidence, hypothesis, and the generation and testing of evolving theory. We Christians wrestle with truth of a different kind.

The Risen Christ leaves Thomas' concerns somehow honored and intact. The Risen Christ of Easter leaves us to wrestle with the intellectual, mathematical, and physical mysteries of the universe and God's relationship with, through, and beyond it. Christ endows good minds and particle accelerators to plumb the questions of Einstein, Newton, Galileo and great contemporary minds like Brian Greene. He leaves the exacting questions of deep-thinking theologians to the theologians.

The Risen Christ, it seems to me, does not expect intellectual comprehension to precede relationship.

Which makes sense, actually. How many of us understand our best friends, our children, our spouses, or even ourselves in any thorough-going intellectual sense?

Why then do we expect ourselves to somehow understand God in the Risen Christ any better?

The message and mystery of Resurrection is much more simple, and much more profound than intellectually rigorous. Which is probably as it should be. Resurrection was not meant for only the intellectually adept and curious (although it belongs to them, too, of course), but was meant too for little children, the aged, the infirm, the uneducated, the powerless, the poor, and people of all walks of life both far and near. It was meant for the scientist as well as the banker. For the librarian as well as the farmer. It was intended for those who say "seeing is believing" like Thomas, for the inspired women first at the tomb like Mary Magdalene, and the bold and sometimes foolish folk who sometimes barely recognize the difference between faith and doubt, let alone stop to ponder it – like Peter.

It was intended for the likes of you and me who spend much of our lives like much of our culture: skeptical, uncertain, bathed in information and opinion, and sometimes living on the borders of existential despair. And yet at other times, of course, joyous, filled with Spirit, hungry to give and receive love, and brimming with hope.

The Risen Christ comes among us in all of our complex humanity, breathing on us the blessing of Spirit and gently uttering peace – shalom – to fear-weary souls. We are, put most simply, freed by the Resurrection. Freed from the power of fear. And freed from the power of death in all its forms. Free to forgive. Free to heal – ourselves and others. Free to embrace relationships that bring transformation.

Relationships with mysterious people and a mysterious God who defies our intellectual constructs and worldviews and demands only that we embrace and offer to others the grace and love of life we have received in whatever way we are best gifted. And to do so no longer in isolation, but in the rough and tumble of community.

And free to love with a clarity and a sense of renewed purpose: the fruits of Resurrection that motivated first apostles broke out into the streets and towns proclaiming the Good News of the Risen Christ to everyone who would listen.