



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE SECOND
SUNDAY OF
EASTER**

APRIL 16, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Today would be just another Sunday...except for one thing. Not quite 2000 years ago, a Jewish prophet, teacher, and healer, was raised from the dead on the Sunday morning after his crucifixion and death the previous Friday. He had been thought by some to be the long-awaited Messiah until he was condemned and crucified as a blasphemer, fraud, and rabblouser. And before the Passover would begin at sunset the day he was crucified, a Roman soldier would plunge a spear into his side, just to be sure he was really dead, which he was.

Neither his Roman executioners nor the Jewish religious leaders who plotted his death wanted to risk his being taken down alive by his followers and restored to good health, thereby allowing them to claim that he had been raised from the dead, as he had suggested would happen. That might have been neither the first nor the last conspiracy theory, and it is one that persists to this day.

Still, the claim that Jesus was raised from the dead on that first Easter remains for many today preposterous. Even one of Jesus' close followers found it too hard to believe and asked for proof. And ever since has been called "doubting Thomas." Most unfairly. He just needed a better publicist.

When do we ever recognize that when his terrified colleagues were hunkered down in hiding, Thomas at least was courageous enough to be out and about in the community, probably picking up dinner? When do we place the emphasis where it ought to be, on Thomas's being the first person to recognize Jesus' divinity and call him "God?"

When do we admit that his skepticism hardly was irrational? What had occurred that evening when Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst was unprecedented in history and thought. And Thomas certainly would seem to have a lot of company in our 21st century. The notion that an obviously dead human being was raised bodily from the dead and socialized and dined with his friends strains credulity well beyond the breaking point. That they would be visible, touchable, and hungry enough not only to eat, but

cook for his friends is easily relegated to fantasy, if not outright lunacy. Our understanding of death just does not admit to that possibility.

Yet, here we are. Some might be satisfied that the reports of the resurrection in the New Testament reflect only a metaphor for a spiritual resurrection or blossoming of a new hope or new morality that resulted from Christ's presence in the world. And certainly the life and teaching of Jesus did revitalize humanity's understanding of God and God's Law.

Some might be satisfied that the stories of the resurrection in the Gospel were there to emphasize Jesus' divinity in a culture that typically saw their gods as immortal. And certainly the apostles and Gospel writers would have sought to convince readers that Jesus was divine, as they had concluded after witnessing Jesus life and ministry first hand.

Some might even be satisfied that "something happened" because now almost 2000 years later, Jesus can boast over two billion followers and an intricate global web of religious institutions and denominations that claim to be Christian.

And some, of course, will simply deny or doubt the resurrection or at least deny its significance and not worry about it, but come to church on Sunday for the community it offers, to say nothing of the gustatory delights of coffee hour. And I am not sure Jesus minds. Well, maybe a little bit.

Because God endowed us with memory, reason, and skill, and reason is one of the three interdependent sources of authority in the Episcopal Church. And our reason might well point to science, and the current state of our scientific knowledge has yet to embrace any verifiable understanding of human life's continuing after our bodily death. Although anecdotal reports from those who have died and been resuscitated have produced a growing body of literature and begun to spark some legitimate scientific inquiry into life after death.

But like our understanding of God, who is beyond our human comprehension, our scientific understanding of the universe is provisional. For example, the James Webb Space Telescope is revealing galaxies never before seen and raising serious questions about our current understanding of the universe. As Matt Mountain, the scientist who manages the operations of the Webb telescope, has observed, dark matter and dark energy, neither of which science currently understands, constitute almost the entire

universe, leading him to conclude, "We are lucky if we even understand 4 percent of the universe."¹

None of this is to denigrate scientific inquiry, scientific knowledge, and scientific discovery. But only to acknowledge its limitations, even with respect to such startling events as the resurrection of a fully human Jesus Christ. That leaves us with historical rather than scientific evidence to support our belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Which takes us back to the empty tomb.

In the first century, the report of the empty tomb standing alone would have evoked a very rational, knee-jerk reaction: grave robbers. That's what Mary Magdalen thought at first. Or, one might have explained it by claiming that Jesus disciples had taken the body and, as the Jewish religious leaders feared, claimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. But we know guards were posted to prevent his body's being taken away.

And we have no reports that the Jewish religious leaders or Romans had even mounted a search for Jesus' body and the disciples who removed it, as they no doubt would have done to foil the disciple's alleged plot. And no dead body was ever found.

As Richard Nixon found out, conspiracies involving even a few people invariably unravel and come to light. There will be a John Dean in every crowd to reveal the truth. And no one ever came forward to expose any such conspiracy among Jesus' followers.

Instead we see Jesus in bodily form appearing in the midst of his gathered apostles. And they were well-aware he was no mere apparition or ghost, despite his passing through closed doors. As is the case today, the appearance of loved ones to family after their deaths, was well known in the first century. But none of the writers of Scripture ever called Jesus a ghost after the resurrection. Indeed, the Greek word they used for resurrection, *anastasis*, referred to someone who was bodily dead, but then discovered to be bodily alive.²

¹ "NASA's James Webb Space Telescope revealing new details of the early universe," CBS News, April 9, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nasa-webb-space-telescope-mysteries-universe-60-minutes-2023-04-09/> (Accessed April 11, 2023).

²Tish Harrison Warren, "Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead?", *New York Times*, April 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/09/opinion/jesus-rise-from-the-dead-easter.html?searchResultPosition=9> (accessed April 11, 2023).

And Jesus' further interactions with his disciples and followers are well-documented in Scripture by the testimony of those with first-hand or contemporaneous knowledge of the resurrection.

As Paul wrote to the nascent church in Corinth:

[H]e appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.³

And John concludes his account of the resurrection reporting that "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book."⁴

There is another facet to the story that reveals Jesus' resurrection as unique and unprecedented. And it can be illustrated with one of the most powerful and poignant stories in all of Scripture. Jesus was bodily raised and bodily present to those around him. But his body was different. What was obvious was that he had endured death and come out on the other side. He had left behind pain, corruption, decay, and death itself.⁵

And that made him hard to recognize at first. To Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. And even to Mary Magdalen:

.....[S]he saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^{*} 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷

³ 1 Cor. 15:5-8 (NRSV).

⁴ John 20:30 (NRSV).

⁵ Warren, *supra*.

The happy ending of all happy endings, and the great beginning of all great beginnings. And the rest as we say is history.