

FROM DEFEAT TO WONDER
(Matthew 28:1-10)

It was Fred's 60th birthday and the whole family was there – brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren. There were balloons and punch and of course a birthday cake. Everyone was having jolly-good time. Three-year-old grandson Zachary was fascinated by a balloon that was jumping up and down, suspended in mid-air. One of his uncles said, "Look, Zachary! It's a magic balloon!" Zachary replied, "No, it's only the air coming up from the vent!" Everyone laughed, but Fred shook his head and mused, "Three years old and already a child of the Enlightenment!"

We are all, more or less, in the same boat as little Zachary. We are all, whether we're conscious of it or not, children of the Enlightenment. We want explanations that are natural or scientific. We look at the world through rational-colored glasses. We have trouble believing in magic or miracles.

And yet the Bible is full of miracles, and today on Easter Sunday we're asked to believe in the biggest miracle of them all, the miracle that stands at the very heart of the Christian faith: the resurrection of Jesus. There's no avoiding it. We hear the story of the empty tomb. We proclaim enthusiastically "Christ is risen!" We sing with gusto "Christ the Lord is risen today." And I suspect a few of you have your fingers crossed, at least figuratively. Luke's Easter story says that when the women reported what they had seen at the tomb, the other disciples dismissed their words as "an idle tale" (Lk. 24:11).

Those skeptical disciples aren't alone. The Easter story sounds like "an idle tale" to lots of people – including, I'd be willing to bet, some of you here this morning. We're like another child of the Enlightenment, Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, who very reasonably said, "There's no use trying; one can't believe impossible things." To which the Queen replied, "I daresay you haven't had much practice...When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." The resurrection might well seem to be one of those impossible things that we can't believe, something to be dismissed as an idle tale.

Actually, skeptics and scoffers have tried to explain away the resurrection from the very beginning. One explanation was that Jesus' friends snuck in and stole his body. That's why Matthew makes such a point of saying the Romans posted guards at the tomb – to refute just that kind of rational explanation. Body snatching may be distasteful, but it's hardly miraculous

There's a common misconception that the Enlightenment drove a wedge between faith and reason, between science and religion. That misconception lies at the heart of the battle over teaching evolution in public schools. For the anti-evolution camp, the Bible is the final word, not just on matters of faith, but on biology and geology and anthropology and cosmology and history as well. Their motto is "the Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it."

That's certainly one approach. But it doesn't work for everyone. Some of us bring our Enlightenment point of view to worship and we don't simply give it up when the Bible presents us with a miracle story.

As I said a moment ago, the Easter story testifies to the greatest miracle of all: the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead. So here's the question: Can a child of the Enlightenment believe that story? And if so, how?

Maybe the best way to come at this is to get personal because there's nothing more personal than what we believe and how we believe it.

So let me say right here, I consider myself a child of the Enlightenment. I make no apologies. I'm a child of the Enlightenment, and yes, I believe the Easter story.

Notice I said "and yes, I believe the story" not "but I believe the story." That means I bring my rational outlook with me. I didn't check my belief in reason or science when I walked into church this morning. I don't agree with Mark Twain, who said, "Faith is believin' what you know ain't so." Or even with the early Christian writer Tertullian who said, "It is to be believed because it is absurd."

For some people, and probably some of you, the Easter faith means one thing: that the tomb was empty on Easter morning because Jesus came bodily out of the tomb. That is certainly one way to understand the Easter story. And down through the centuries, that's how most people have understood it.

But that's not the only way to understand it. And it's apparently not the way the apostle Paul understood it. Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church at least 20 years before any of the gospels were written, at least two decades before Matthew wrote the story that we heard this morning. Here's what he said: "I handed on to you...what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins...and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day...and that he appeared to Cephas [that is Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time...Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles." Then comes the key, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

Notice what Paul doesn't say there. He doesn't say that a flesh-and-blood Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Quite the contrary. The story of Paul's conversion in the book of Acts tells us that Christ appeared to him as a blinding light and a voice from heaven. And this is the important thing: Paul doesn't say that Christ's appearance to him was any different from any of those other appearances.

(By the way, the very earliest gospel, Mark, doesn't say anything about Jesus appearing to anyone on Easter or any other time.)

So the New Testament doesn't speak with one voice. There's not one Easter story. There are at least five if we include Paul.

So where does that leave us? Do we understand the Easter stories literally: This is what actually happened and a video camera would have recorded it just this way if there had been video cameras back then, ignoring the fact that each gospel's camera would show something different? Or do we

understand it metaphorically: Jesus' spirit lived on in the hearts and minds and lives of his disciples no matter what happened to his body?

Literally and metaphorically are two very different ways to come at the Easter story. What I want to suggest is that we shouldn't get hung up on which approach is right, because neither one of them is adequate. Regardless of which approach you take, there's another question, a more important question – and that's simply "So what?"

Let's say we take the story as literally true – Jesus was raised bodily. How nice for Jesus! But so what? Why should *I* care? What difference does it make *to me*? And if we take it metaphorically, same thing. Feeling Jesus' presence must have been comforting for his friends who missed him so much. But so what? Why should *I* care? What difference does it make *to me*?

I don't think debates about what actually happened on Easter morning get us very far – or in any case they don't get us far enough. Take the story literally, take it metaphorically, take it any way you want, we still have to answer that most important question of all: So what? What we believe can't affect what actually happened one way or the other. But what we believe has to affect how we live.

Matthew and the other gospel writers weren't merely reporting facts. They were testifying to their faith that God's new creation has begun and we've got a job to do. The gospel writers weren't merely telling the news that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They were testifying to the good news faith that God's reign has begun and that the world is being transformed.

The question ultimately is not what do we make of Easter, but what does Easter make of us.