

A New Life in Jesus

What is the opposite of faith? Here's a hint: it's not doubt. Today we're going to find out why.

Chinese President Xi Jinping was in Moscow recently for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. A video shows 18 bags of Kentucky Fried Chicken food being dropped off just after the delegation arrived at the hotel where he and his delegation were staying in preparation for his meeting.

What does it mean? Was it some kind of a signal, or is it nothing at all. Did he even order the food, or did some other group order it and it was just a coincidence that it came just after his delegation arrived? Just because events seem to be connected, doesn't mean that they are. There are facts, but what they mean is a mystery.

That's not what we mean by mystery in the Christian faith. A mystery in the Christian faith is not like a mystery that we can figure out, like in a novel or a play.

It's a mystery in the sense that we can't understand it unless it is revealed to us from outside of ourselves. That is the mystery of salvation. The gift of God that we celebrated last weekend.

The first Easter weekend began with the Jesus' death and ended with his resurrection. He had given his life and he had taken it back again.

It was the best news in the history of the world, yet we come to know it in the presence of doubt. How does God deal with doubt? Today, we're going to find out.

The Second Sunday of Easter is the time by which Easter Eggs are turned into egg salad sandwiches. The Sunday after Easter Sunday is sometimes called "Low Sunday", or what could be called the Sunday of Disappointment! It's the Sunday when we all look around and ask, "Where is everybody?"

Today is known by some as the First Weekend in the Coachella Music Festival.

In Western Christianity it's also known as Divine Mercy Sunday, the Octave Day of Easter, White Sunday, and Quasimodo Sunday.

Yes, that's right, "Quasimodo" Sunday, the name of The Hunchback of Notre Dame so named in the Church calendar because he was found at the cathedral as a hunchbacked infant on "Quasimodo Sunday", which was named after the first words of the antiphon of the Latin introit in the Mass for that day, found in **1 Peter 2:2**, "quasi modo geniti

infantes..." or "Like newborn infants..." It's also the name of a surfing position. But I digress. 😊

Last Sunday, The Sunday of the Resurrection of Our Lord, aka Easter Sunday, our churches were as full as they get. Christ is Risen! He is Risen, Indeed! We celebrated that, and today it will almost be like it never happened.

There are some people who don't keep the sabbath holy every Sunday. But if there is one when they do, it will be Easter. Others are dragged or guilted-in by insistent friends and relatives. Some are bribed with the promise of candy and, for adults, food afterwards. Some come just because it's what they and/or their family have always done and has become part of their identity. They, as Steely Dan said, "suit up for a game they no longer play".

Our churches will have put out their best everything in the hopes that some will come back. And maybe some will but, if you had never been to a church and you were there last Sunday, you're probably going to be just as flummoxed as everybody else is today.

Our Gospel text for today, however, is even more disappointing!

How do you witness the resurrected body of Jesus, after he had told you he was going to rise from the dead, and not know what to do?

The disciples are gathered on the evening of the Resurrection.

They are still processing what happened in the morning. Then this happens in **John 20:19-23**,

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

The disciples were afraid of the Jewish leaders. They were afraid that what had happened to Jesus could happen to them. Yet, it's been said that the Bible says "fear not" or "don't be afraid" or something like that 366 times, one for every day of the year plus one for a leap year! Jesus said these or similar words many times.

When Jesus suddenly appears in a locked room with them, the first words out of his mouth are "Peace be with you", shalom aleichem, a common, even casual greeting.

Then things get weirder. He shows them his wounds, on his hands and on his side. He commissions them with a mini-Pentecost, just for them. He breathes on them. Does that seem strange?

What else began with a breath?

Genesis 2:7,

7 then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

What is the authority of the Bible?

2 Timothy 3:16-17,

16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Other translations replace “inspired” with “God-breathed”. The Bible’s life comes from God. It is the means by which God comes alive for us.

But one disciple, who had ventured out, was not present when Jesus breathed life and power on the disciples. We see it in **John 20:24-29,**

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 27 Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” 28 Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29 Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

So there’s a doubter? Jesus moves forward to send the disciples out anyway. Remember how the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel Matthew is set, in **Matthew 28:16-20,**

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

“When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” First of all, how could they doubt him. They had seen him die. They had seen him do miracles! They had seen him dead. They had seen his side pierced with a spear and the water from the by-then

separated plasma flow out. They had seen his legs broken. They had seen his burial, and he had appeared to them on the evening of the third day.

Some doubted, yet they worshiped him. How could that be?

We live in an increasingly secular age. We live in a time when people have been isolated and estranged and, I believe, are hungry for the real community that God gives.

Pastor Will Willimon is a Methodist pastor who has also been a seminary professor, university chaplain, the Methodist equivalent of a bishop and is a fine preacher. He tells the story of a young woman who was a member of a congregation he served who made an appointment to see him during the week. She came by his office and said, "Pastor Willimon, I just wanted to say that I won't be coming to church anymore. I've been struggling with my faith for a while, and I just realized that I can't do it anymore. I appreciate everything that you and the church members have done for me, and I didn't want to just drift away. I just came to say goodbye."

Pastor Willimon tried to address her struggles and encourage her to continue, but she was having none of it. And, the next Sunday she was back at worship. And the Sunday after that. And the Sunday after that.

Finally, Pastor Willimon asked if she could stop by his office again, and she agreed. Pastor Willimon said, "Aren't you the same person who came by and said that she no longer had faith and wouldn't be coming to worship anymore?" She smiled and said, "Yes." "Well then, I'm happy to see you, but could you tell me what happened?" he said.

"Well," she answered, "It came to me that sometimes, if you can't believe for yourself, you have to be with people who will believe for you."

So, when people tell me that they are having doubts, I ask them to be consistent in their doubting and to question their doubts as well. Doubt their doubts.

Thomas came to belief because he saw the risen Christ and put his hand in his wounds. That's not something that happens to us. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," Jesus said.

How do people come to believe?

According to The Barna Group, 94% of people who come to Christ do so before their 18th birthday.

Study after study has shown that 80-85% of all people who come to Christ do so because of the influence of a friend or a relative.

Each of us has a story of how we became a Christian or why we remain a Christian.

This passage from John ends by describing the purpose of the whole Gospel of John with what I think are two of the most important verses in the Bible, in **John 20:30-31**,

***30** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. **31** But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Some of those who were at worship in Christian churches last Sunday were not doubters. They weren't even interested. They were (Is it too harsh to say it?) spiritual tourists. They are like the young woman who sat next to one of my colleagues on a plane who, seeing her Bible, described herself as proudly "spiritual, not religious". In reflecting on their conversation the pastor said, "I am always interested in people who find ancient religion boring, but who find themselves endlessly fascinating."

What we offer is neither religion nor self-affirmation. We proclaim Jesus, crucified, risen, and coming again. We proclaim that belief is a gift from God and leads people to life that truly is life in a living relationship with the one true living God. God doesn't abandon us in our doubt. God gives us something to do for others, in response to what he has already done for us on the cross. God inspires us with a living relationship!

There are many good reasons to believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ:

1. The evidence of death.
2. The sixteen Roman guards stationed to prevent any trickery.
3. The seal of the punitive authority of Roman Empire set upon the stone.
4. The disciples were in shock.
5. There was no body and no benefit to steal the body.
6. The witness of women at the center of events in a time of Patriarchy.
7. The martyrdom of the eyewitness.
8. The martyrdom of the early Christians.
9. The experience of Christians to this day.
10. The change in the sabbath from the seventh day to the day of the Resurrection as the day of worship for the Church now begun, a radical change.
11. The lack of details
12. The testimony of hostile witnesses who became Christians, i.e., St. Paul.

And yet, over the years, people have not come to believe because of reasons. They have received a living relationship with the one true living God in Jesus Christ.

Our logo is an expression of the basis for that relationship, and of what we believe and who we are.

It consists of an open Bible with a cross at its center.

It depicts the Lutheran belief that the Bible is the only foundation for our faith and life. Everything in the Bible points to Jesus' death on the cross. The whole history of salvation comes to its fulfillment at the cross. It is there that we receive new life and are sent into the world to serve.

We encounter God through the reading or hearing of the Bible. God changes us in that encounter and we become a new Creation, born again, the people of God through God's transformational power. We are called, equipped, and sent to serve others and, in so doing, find our true selves.

The authority of the Bible comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, the one God in three persons. It is God and it is God-breathed. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of the Bible is present to everyone who reads or hears the Bible. God is present when the Bible is read or heard, and it is through the Bible that we experience a dynamic encounter with God that changes us.

The leaves of the open Bible in the logo suggest open hands, presenting God's gift of God's self. The sacrifice of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, on the cross restores the living relationship with God for which humanity was created. It gives us a peace that passes human understanding and eternal life for all who believe and are baptized.

The lines of the logo point upward, calling us to love God and, as a result, to love one another by being servants of God and caring for God's whole creation in response to the love we have first received from God.

The two sides of the logo suggest our hands, open as in giving an offering in response to God's love for us. The elevated cross at the center points to our response to Jesus' invitation to take up our cross and follow Him.

The open sides also suggest the lines of the roof of St. Paul's as seen from Garfield Avenue. They are open and inviting to the community to come and worship the living God with us and to join us in serving our community and the world around us together in God's presence and to God's glory.

The cross rises in our logo.

Christ has overcome sin, death, and all the forces that defy God. He is Risen. He is Risen, Indeed.

What Jesus has done for us in his death and resurrection is not mystery. It is expressed in our Gospel reading for today, in John 20, it is life in his name.

The opposite of faith isn't doubt. It's certainty. If we had certainty, we wouldn't need faith. And we would have a very small god.

God, the creator of the universe, the liberator of his people Israel, the savior of all who believe and are baptized, the one who hears our prayer and forgives our sin, and makes us holy places fit for the one true holy God to live in, is big. We have received Jesus; we have received life in his name.

And blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

He is Risen! He is Risen, Indeed!