

Easter...An Open Mind and Heart

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Luke 24:13-32

This is the day that Western Christians are celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus. Quakers have always emphasized that *every day* is Easter, or that Christ is always being resurrected anew within our hearts. In our earliest years we did not celebrate the resurrection only once a year...For early Friends, it was, and for many Friends today it is a *continuous* celebration.

In recent years, Quakers, for the most part, have recognized that it is alright to be reminded of this event in the form of a holiday. I believe that as humans, we often need outward reminders about special events and days in our lives and in our faith. And so today, we are reminded about the most important day in the Christian calendar.

Now, there are different ways to look at the resurrection. Some insist it did not happen. These persons cannot wrap their minds around what we read about in the Gospels. How can someone be brought back to life following death? For them, it is impossible.

For others, they accept it without question. It is the central article of their faith, and what they read in the Gospel narratives is Truth, with a capital T, even though the accounts of the resurrection vary with each narrative.

A third way is what I would call the Quaker way, and that is *keeping an open mind and an open heart*. We can believe in miracles and we can believe in science. We can be open to a resurrection experience in our hearts, and we can be open to how the Gospels portray Jesus' resurrection, asking questions and processing the scholarship that is available to us. These things are not mutually exclusive.

Although there are many different accounts of the resurrection story, with each Gospel giving us a version that is at variance with others, there is one thing on which they all agree. They all assert their conviction that something happened following the crucifixion that forced them to entertain the possibility that the ultimate barrier that each human life faces...our finitude and mortality, had somehow *been breached*. Whatever the Easter moment was, it had a profound effect

upon the Disciples, which altered their behavior and their understanding of God. On this we can all agree.

Now, the Christian Testament is ambiguous about the nature of this resurrection. The Gospels for the most part, and the Book of Acts, emphasize that Jesus *physically* rose from the dead. But in his Letters, Paul makes it clear that he believed the resurrection was strictly *spiritual*. It is important to note that there is no mention of an empty tomb in any of Paul's Letters. In one Gospel account following the resurrection Jesus is eating fish with his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and in another he is vanishing through closed doors. The fact that these two very different perspectives exist side by side in the Bible is a sign, ignored by many Christians, that there ought to be room among us for different interpretations.

I remember speaking before a group of Presbyterians, and one man asked me pointedly, "Do you believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus?" I told him that I was keeping an open mind and heart, which he did not think was an adequate answer. I went on to explain that in

Scripture you will find evidence for both a *physical resurrection*, and a *spiritual resurrection*. Unfortunately, this was such a major issue in this man's theology, that he could not remain in the group if I was not adamant in my belief in a physical resurrection...and so he left.

For the disciples and for those persons Jesus left behind following the crucifixion, whatever else Easter was, it had somehow brought Jesus into the very meaning of *who God is*. It was in his company that they came to know God. In his words they heard the Word of God. In his activity they experienced the Kingdom of God. They became committed to him and his vision of a new Kingdom, a new world that was coming into being...A Kingdom where *love* was central.

Following the death of Jesus, his followers, very soon thereafter, began to believe that the Spirit of God...the spirit of love that Jesus so movingly represented in his own life, was *not* snuffed out. Their Jewish tradition of Martyrdom and redemption gave them the words by which to proclaim this: *God raised Jesus from the dead*. As the spiritual life of the community of his followers continued, they could speak of it not

just as the life of the spirit, or of God's Spirit. It now became, also, *life in the Spirit of Christ*.

I love the passage from Luke that I shared earlier. It is one of my favorites. Here are two disciples, walking along the Road to Emmaus, disappointed, rejected, their leader killed like any other criminal. What are more moving than the words of these disciples to the stranger who walked with them, "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." What sad words. The enthusiasm of his presence, the shared vitality, the creative hope—all of these were gone.

But then, another event, and one of a totally different order began to occur. In a very short time these broken followers of Jesus became strong, confident and bold. They sang ...they rejoiced...they taught, and they suffered gladly. And this they did not only for a few days of passing enthusiasm, but for the remainder of their lives.

How do we explain such a dramatic turnaround in behavior? What would have given these broken disciples sufficient cause to become strong, bold and confident? Their answer: *It happened, solely because*

they were convinced that Jesus had been resurrected. What kind of resurrection, we do not know...But on one point there was agreement, the early disciples experienced something that made their hearts burn within them, and that was the cause for the complete transformation of their lives.

And so, on this rainy Easter morning here in the Ohio Valley, let us keep open hearts and minds about the resurrection. We know about the many contradictions in the statements of the witnesses to the resurrection, and we know how such an event defies reason. *We also, know, however, that for the followers of Jesus, something extraordinary happened.* Somehow, they became absolutely certain that the boundary between God and humans, between heaven and earth, between life and death had been broken. These early followers of Jesus tried to use words to explain what was beyond words. And the event that was beyond words to explain, changed their lives forever. And this event, the event that we call the resurrection, has continued to change the lives of persons for 2000 years.

