

The resurrection

Easter is the ultimate celebration of life!

It is not, as some friends have interpreted for me, a wonderful



Michael Olmsted

reminder that we must leave a heritage of love and morality when we come to death. It is not a touching story of a great philosopher/prophet who gave away his life as an ultimate sacrifice to show us a better way to live. It is not a reminder that we are only truly different from all other creatures when we center our life on self-sacrifice and exemplary ethics.

All of these ideas contain the elements of idealism and living beyond selfish motivation. None of these ideas address the origin of existence, the innate possibilities that set us apart from a cockroach, the thought that we are more than a minor cog in the machinery of creation, or the spiritual side of a person that must be explained in the most elaborate theories of science or philosophy.

The jumbled annals of history offer beautiful examples of heroism, compassion and self-sacrifice. But there is only one dark Friday outside Jerusalem when God's Son allowed the world to nail him to a cross so we can know beyond doubt and fear that we are loved and can experience purpose unlimited by the realities of now!

Luke's version of Jesus' resurrection should be seen as a break from the writer's background in man-made religions and the struggle of Jesus' own followers to believe their Christ had experienced death and vanquished its power. Easter is no fairytale about a superhero who flies through the sky to defeat mortal enemies and prove we are right and powerful. This is the Jesus who spent time with people who suffered, offered hope to those who seemed undeserving and revealed his Father as the God of grace.

Jesus died on Friday and was buried before sundown because sundown marked the beginning of Sabbath when no work could be done. The women came to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body on Sunday morning because Sabbath concluded with sunrise.

Confronting an empty tomb with its protective stone pushed aside, those women were panic-stricken. What could be the explanation? Had grave robbers, perhaps in league with the high priest or Roman authorities, hidden the body so it could not be used to incite riots? Had the apostles hidden the body to protect it or themselves?

Two angels appeared, identified by their "glimmering bright clothing," asking the women why they were looking for "the living among the dead?" (vv. 4-5). The women only remembered Jesus' teaching that he must be crucified and would "rise from death on the third day" when the angels reminded them (v. 6).

Luke identifies these three women as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James. The first two women are known as early financial supporters of Jesus' ministry (Luke 8:1-3). James was a common name and we know several followers of Jesus named James, so we are not sure of the identity of the third woman. Verse 10 also mentions "other women with them."

The remaining 11 apostles (Judas is gone) and others regarded the women's report as "nonsense" (v. 11). Notice the Apostle Peter has rejoined the group after his betrayal of Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest's house. Peter rushed to the grave and found only "the linen cloth" remaining, leaving Peter to struggle with his thoughts.

Luke interrupts the basic story to tell about Jesus' appearance to two other followers who were returning home to Emmaus when Jesus appeared to them (Luke 24:13-33). At some point in those confusing hours Jesus appeared to Peter (v. 34).

Luke must have been amazed countless times as he sought out witnesses to the resurrection appearances or those who had heard first-person accounts. We tend to think disbelief and skepticism are only modern reactions to Jesus' resurrection, but even his apostles struggled with this powerful truth.

For centuries, debates have raged over Jesus' resurrection. Is it real or a poetic statement of love and hope in this dark world? Is it rational to believe there is a "divine intelligence" beyond our physical universe? Religion can be so divisive,

Formations

March 27, 2016

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12, 33b-34

unnecessary and illogical, so why not build a universal ethical philosophy for mankind's salvation? Is not all religion little more than folklore or wishful thinking?

Take a serious look at Jesus' death and resurrection, but be certain to review the foundation of his words and actions. Don't forget the salvation history of Israel and the complex writings of the Jewish Bible. Then look carefully at the cross and think about all the ways we classify as "sinners," our acts of violence and prejudice, twisting of love into lust, using one another to our personal benefit and reshaping God into a caricature of human selfishness.

Watch Jesus die and listen as he cries out for God, as he prays for his executioners, as he forgives the thief dying at his side. In this death and resurrection God offers every one of us not only forgiveness, but an invitation to life beyond time and all we know. The grave is empty because Jesus defeated death and evil. He has no need for a grave any more! In his resurrection is our life.

Who are you most like? Peter, who denied Jesus, then experienced his forgiveness and becomes the key leader of the early Jerusalem church? The women who came to the grave on resurrection morning to care for Jesus' body instead of celebrating his living presence? The apostles and so many others who could not believe Jesus' promise had come true? No matter how many arguments we formulate, how much doubt or guilt we hold close, there remains an empty grave and risen Christ offering us God's love, forgiveness, healing and eternal life.

Easter is when we remember what Jesus promised and consider how we will live from this day on. Like last year, we will not know all the answers, live as though we are angels or be exempt from problems. But we will celebrate the truth that Christ is risen and share that hope with our world.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.