

Proof
Matthew 28:1 – 15; John 20:19 – 31
Sunday, April 28, 2019

The day before Easter, the *New York Times* published an interview with Serene Jones, the President of Union Theological Seminary in New York. The first question she was asked was, “Do you think of Easter as a literal flesh-and-blood resurrection?” She said, “When you look in the Gospels, the stories are all over the place. Those who claim to know whether or not it happened are kidding themselves. For me, the message of Easter is that love is stronger than life or death. That’s a much more awesome claim than that they put Jesus in the tomb and three days later he wasn’t there. For Christians for whom the physical resurrection becomes a sort of obsession, that seems to me to be a pretty wobbly faith. What if tomorrow someone found the body of Jesus still in the tomb? Would that then mean that Christianity was a lie? Faith is stronger than that.” She went on to talk about the virgin birth, saying, “I find the virgin birth a bizarre claim.” And when asked, “What happens when we die,” she said, “I don’t know! There may be something, there may be nothing.”¹

This interview got a lot of attention, because she’s the president of a major seminary, and in the week since then, she has taken a *lot* of criticism for it. There are articles and posts all over the internet from Christians saying, “This is a Christian minister and the president of a seminary! How can she deny a physical resurrection? How can she call the virgin birth of Jesus a bizarre claim? How can she say there may be nothing after we die? How can she call herself a Christian?”

I think that the debate over this highlights a relevant point. This is nothing new. There have been debates for the past 2,000 years over whether the resurrection *really happened*. And every

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/20/opinion/sunday/christian-easter-serene-jones.html>

year, right around this time, there is a flood of articles in newspapers, magazines, and on the internet, as well as shows on television, attempting to “explain” the resurrection. There is one explanation is called the “Swoon Theory.” It says that Jesus didn’t really die at all, he just came very *close* to death; he was unconscious or in a coma, but three days in the coolness of the tomb revived him.

There is one explanation that Serene Jones touched on in that interview, that Jesus didn’t actually, physically rise from the dead; that it’s more of a *metaphor*; that he rose in his disciples’ hearts and minds and kept on living in *them*.

Probably the most common explanation is that the disciples stole Jesus’ body and just *told* everyone that he was alive. That’s what we see in the reading from Matthew. Some of the Roman soldiers go and tell the Jewish religious leaders that Jesus has been resurrected. The Jewish religious leaders were the ones who pushed to have Jesus *killed*, so they hear that he has risen from the dead, and that’s obviously not a good P.R. situation for them. Because if he actually *has* risen from the dead, then there must be something pretty big going on with him, and they were the ones who had him killed. That doesn’t make them look too good. So they want to squash this. They pay off the Roman guards to tell people that Jesus *wasn’t* resurrected; that his disciples just came in the middle of the night and took his body out of the tomb and *said* that he was resurrected.

It ends by saying that “this story is still told among the Jews to this day.” Matthew’s gospel was written somewhere around 80 or 90 A.D., so we’re talking fifty years later, that story was still being told in an attempt to explain the resurrection.

And 2,000 years later, that story is still being told among *us*. We live in a world where there is still a lot of *doubt* surrounding the resurrection. But even more amazing to me than all these stories that attempt to prove that the resurrection *didn't* happen is the number of books, articles, web pages, and TV shows devoted to proving that the resurrection really *did* happen. So many Christians feel the need to defend and explain their faith, to make it rational and sensible and understandable, to be practical about how this all happened.

But you know what? *We can't*. We can't *prove* this. I mean, if we're going to be *honest* about our faith, have honest conversations about our faith, *that's* where we have to start; we *believe* it, but there is no way we can actually *prove* it. We have to start with that confession. We can argue until we're blue in the face, we can quote scripture and theologians. But we cannot actually *prove* it, because we weren't there. We're taking someone's word for it. And that person took someone *else's* word for it. And they took someone *else's* word for it. The resurrection isn't something you can *prove* through *reason* or *logic*. It's something that we take on *faith*.

Serene Jones was right when she said that the virgin birth is a bizarre claim. *It is* a bizarre claim! The *resurrection* is a bizarre claim! Jesus walking on water and turning water into wine and feeding 5,000 people with only a few loaves of bread are bizarre claims! Our faith is *full* of bizarre claims. The story of *God becoming a human being* is absolutely incomprehensible, and the idea that God loves us enough to die for us, and then come *back* from death, is beyond any rational explanation. There is simply nothing we can do to make *sense* out of all of this, nothing we can do to make it logical or scientific. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead just does not fit in to any of our frames of reference. It defies reality. The whole thing is just surrounded by *confusion* and *doubt*.

But that *doubt* is not *disqualifying*.

There were bizarre claims and doubts on the *first* Easter, too. If you remember last week, when the women told the disciples about the angels at the tomb telling them that Jesus was risen, it says that the disciples thought it to be an idle tale, and they did not believe them. Bizarre claims and doubts. By the time we find the disciples in our reading from John's gospel, all the excitement has already taken place. The women have run to and from the tomb, finding it empty, encountering Jesus, and telling the disciples that he is alive. But now it's evening, and instead of being out celebrating or spreading the good news, the disciples are in a house with the doors locked, trying to figure all this out! You see, that first Easter morning was not a big, triumphant celebration; it was a whirlwind of confusion and doubt and surprise and terror and amazement and wonder. None of it made sense, so they locked themselves in a room.

All of a sudden, Jesus is right there in the middle of the room with them, showing them the wounds in his hands and his side. He *shows* them, they see him with their own eyes, but still Thomas (who wasn't there) says, "I need proof." The disciples all say, "We *saw* him, *we're* your proof." But Thomas just can't comprehend it and says, "Unless I see his wounds and touch them, I won't believe."

That was the first Easter Sunday. A locked room filled with disbelief and questions and doubts and demands for proof. And what I love is, we fast-forward one week, to the Sunday *after* Easter, and John says the disciples are *still* locked in a room! It says, "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them...the doors were shut." One whole week has passed, and they *still* can't make sense out of all this.

Even in Matthew's gospel, when Jesus finally appears to the disciples, it says that "when they saw him, they worshipped him; *but some doubted.*"

You see, they *all* had doubts about the reality of the resurrection. The difference is that Thomas' doubts kept him from believing. He needed *proof* to make sense out of all of this. The other disciples *didn't*. They were just as confused and scared and filled with doubts, but they were able to *worship him*, even in the *midst* of their doubts.

There's a story about a group of people hiding in a bunker in France during the German occupation in WWI. They had been there for months, some of them *years*, hiding in this dark, cramped space. One day an Allied soldier opened the door to the bunker and announced that Germany had been defeated and that they were *free*. Some of the people scrambled up the ladder immediately. They couldn't wait to get out and embrace their freedom and start living their lives again. But there were some who *doubted* what the soldier said. They thought it was a trap, and that there were going to be a bunch of German soldiers waiting outside the bunker to shoot them as soon as they come out. So they stayed there.

We hear that and say there were two kinds of people in that story: those who *believed* (or had *faith*) in what the soldier told them, and those who *doubted* and did *not* believe. But I would be willing to bet that, after years of fear and hiding out in that bunker, cut off from the outside world, *every single person in there* had doubts about whether this news was true. For some of them, their doubts were just too overwhelming and *kept* them there. But the others had to be thinking, "You know what? *I have no idea* if this is true. But I'm going to take a chance and go see." And they went forward, even *with* their doubts. *That* is faith.

Faith is not about eliminating any shred of doubt. It's not about *certainty*. Faith is about the ways that we keep seeking, keep following, keep believing, keep holding on, even in the midst of our doubts. It's saying, "I don't know. I don't know if this is true. I can't *prove* this to you. But I'm going to take a chance and go see."

As people of the resurrection, we are called not to leave our doubts at the door, but to bring them with us on this journey to discover where Christ is living and at work in this world and in our lives today. We're called to keep holding on to God and to each other; to keep pursuing truth and beauty and justice and righteousness, even if it costs us our *certainty*. Faith is about letting go of our need for certainty and embracing the unknown and finding a way to be *okay* with it; opening ourselves up to the *mysteries of life* and standing in *awe* and *wonder* before God. It's not about being *right* or having *proof* or even *seeing for ourselves*. It's *following* where we *cannot see* and *trusting* where we *have no proof* that God is with us.

Peter Rollins is an Irish theologian and author, and he talks about how someone once accused him of denying the resurrection; like he was suggesting that the resurrection never physically happened. And instead of arguing back with him, Rollins says, "Yeah, you're right. I *do* deny the resurrection. Every time I do not serve my neighbor, every time I walk away from people who are poor, I am denying the resurrection. I deny the resurrection every time I participate in an unjust system. *And I affirm* the resurrection every now and again, when I stand up for those who are on their knees. I affirm the resurrection when I cry out for those people who have had their tongues torn out; when I weep for those people who have no more tears to shed."

He says, “Christians are not called to *believe* in the resurrection; rather, we are called to *be the site* where resurrection *takes place*.”

We can't *prove* our faith or the resurrection with logic and reason and science and fact. But we can prove the resurrection is real by how we *live*. When we forgive others and give them the chance to start over, we are *proving* the difference that the resurrection makes in our lives. When we break the power that addiction or depression holds over us or over someone we love, we are *proving* that resurrection is real. When we find a way to laugh and be happy again after facing unbelievable pain and sadness, we are *proving* that resurrection is real. When we *keep going* and praying and singing and praising God through cancer and divorce and death, we are *proving* that resurrection is real. When we stand up against injustice and poverty and hunger, we are proving that resurrection is real.

So maybe the question we should be asking today is not whether the resurrection really *happened*, but whether it *happens*. We can *prove* that Jesus rose from the dead by *being the site* where he *continues* to rise from the dead. We can *prove* the resurrection by *living* the resurrection, even as we struggle with *doubts* about the resurrection. It's *okay* to have doubts. It's *okay* to say, “You know what, *I don't know*. I don't know whether the resurrection actually, physically happened. I believe that it did, and everything in me tells me that this story is good and true and life-giving. I believe that it happened because I see glimpses all around me that point to God's ability to bring life out of death. I don't know, but I *feel it*, deep in the core of my being, and I *believe*, even though I have no tangible proof to offer you except *my own life*.”

People have doubted the resurrection for 2,000 years. And they will *continue* to doubt it for 2,000 more. But *we can prove it* by living in ways that show the world that new life is possible.

By living in ways that break free of the old patterns of sin and hate and injustice and death. Because when people see you *doing* that, they will *know* that Christ is risen, because he's living in *you*.