

## “Is Jesus Dead?”

Jeremiah 31:1-6; *Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24*; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10

Early in the morning, at the tomb of Jesus, an angel said to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, “Do not be afraid. Jesus is not here. He has been raised.”

All these years later, there continues to be various ideas and thoughts, theories and speculations about that first Easter morning. Is the gospel story true or did a small group of politically motivated grave robbers remove the body? What does this ancient gospel story about the resurrection say to us who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Is Jesus truly the risen Christ or is Jesus dead?

Sitting somewhat patiently in a reception area, I happened to pick up a recent edition of Time Magazine. The cover title immediately captured my attention. In bold letters the following question was posed, “Is Truth Dead?”

Fifty years ago, on Good Friday in April 1966, Time Magazine published another eye-catching cover. The cover title created quite a stir even for a young Christian like me. Catechized and confirmed by the church, the title raised a very controversial question, “Is God Dead?”

The title was printed in bold red letters against an all-black background. Against the backdrop of the Cold War between East and the West, growing nuclear proliferation, the war in Viet Nam, the Civil Rights movement, the Sexual Revolution, and the new pop and drug culture, the question invited readers to reflect on the meaning of existence.

With great human suffering around the globe, the author framed his story as a means to emphasize “the new atheism” of the 1960’s, a testimony to the cultural crisis of faith in which the very premise of a personal God was coming undone.

Is truth dead? Is God dead? Is the Easter story true? Pondering these questions, I found a book in my study given to me by my mother when I was fourteen years old following one of her business trips to Chicago. It is a green covered paperback with the title, “New Theology No. 1.” Copyrighted in 1964, the pocket-sized book contains 15 essays written by theologians from around the world in a period of time filled with great restlessness and impatience, anxiety and uncertainty. (Bill and Mary Ann Tupper’s son, Brian, in Seoul, Korea: Evacuation = 1 hr.)

The first essay recorded in the book is written by a professor of theology, John Macquarrie, who tells the story about receiving an invitation to gather with fellow faculty members in a special symposium, which would serve as an opportunity for each professor to explain as clearly as possible to members of other faculties the nature of one’s studies. Teaching at the time at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, the symposium was attended by a host of scientists, classical writers, lawyers, medical researchers, and all sorts of scholars.

Macquarrie worked hard to develop a paper around a theme of theology that he hoped could easily be understood by the audience. His hope was quickly shattered when a physicist stood and said, “The speaker was quite intelligible until he introduced the word “God” in his talk. The word “God” does not stand for anything within my range of concepts or experience, and so every sentence in which it was used was to me meaningless, and the whole paper was unintelligible. Will the speaker kindly tell us what the word “God” signifies?”

Macquerrie notes that his scientific colleague had rendered a valuable service. There must always be some measure of common ground between a speaker and one's audience if the speaker is to connect with his listeners. The celebration of Easter is our common ground, but it would not surprise me if there are some of us sitting in the pew who have a strong curiosity and maybe some measured doubt about this whole matter of resurrection. (Ed Cates: "I'm not afraid, I just have a lot of questions.")

Through the years, I have been a member of that school of thought that teaches we are very much conditioned by the environment in which we live. By example, the culture of my family encouraged me as a child and youth to read the Bible, say my prayers, attend Sunday worship at First Presbyterian Church, and to love God and neighbor. All these years later, I still read the Bible, say my prayers, attend Sunday worship at a Presbyterian Church, love God and neighbor with Jesus at the center of who I am, what I believe, and how I live.

But as I stand here in this pulpit, I believe you must address a very important question, "Does the pastor affirm his faith in the resurrection of Christ because of the culture of his family, or does the pastor affirm his faith in the resurrection because of personal belief and conviction?" There is a difference.

As one who appreciates the inquiries of science, the discoveries of science, and the positive gifts of science, that enables medical research, facilitates the exploration of our oceans and outer space, and provides a host of other things, I am also one who has taken what Soren Kierkegaard described as the "leap of faith."

My leap of faith is based on the wisdom of the psalms and the message of the gospel that teaches God is on the other side of death (Psalm 90 & 102); that in the end, by way of God's power, life will triumph over death ((Psalm 16:9 ff.); and that we find this life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. My leap of faith is based on the preaching of the once intimidated and frightened Peter in the streets of Jerusalem, "Jesus was put to death, but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear to those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." (Acts 10:39b ff.) My leap of faith is based on writing of the Apostle Paul, the legal-minded, fundamentally strict Pharisee who was converted to Christianity on the road to Damascus. Paul later wrote in a letter to the Corinthians, "Jesus died, was buried and raised on the third day. He appeared to the apostles and he also appeared to me." (1 Corinthians 15:3 ff.)

Is Jesus dead or was he raised on the third day? There comes a point in time in the life of every person where we face the crisis of decision. We either believe or we do not. My decision to believe is most importantly grounded and rooted in the moment in which the Galilean said, "Steve, my friend, pick up your cross. Come and follow me." My decision has been to follow the Risen Christ not a dead man. In the words of Tim Keller, pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC, "The minute we decide to follow Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit comes into our lives. It is the power of the resurrection. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead."

Starting where we began, the Psalmist speaks about life and death in the context of faith and hope, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever." (Psalm 118:29) And the Risen Jesus says, "Pick up your cross. Come and follow me, and I will show you the grace of eternal life." Living in a dangerous and uncertain world, where evil and darkness loom, may we live in the power of the resurrection, and all God's people said, "Amen!"