

Looking for the Evidence

John 20:1-10

Yesterday was a dreary day, solidly overcast, rainy, and chilly. Although scripture doesn't bother to give us a report of what the weather was like on Holy Saturday, the day Jesus lay in the tomb, I like to think that that day some 2,000 years or so ago, was just like yesterday – dreary and depressing.

The first time I visited the Holy Land several years ago, it was springtime and it was beautiful. The second night I was there it rained, much like it did here yesterday, gentle and steady. The next morning I took a walk. The sun was out and everything smelled fresh and new. Moisture still lingered on the shrubbery. Flowers were blooming. I took several deep breaths and felt like I was inhaling the sweetness of creation itself. What a gift it was that God had provided! It was grace upon grace. I have always thought that the original Easter Sunday in Jerusalem was like that, a bright and sunny spring day that stood in stark contrast to the oppressiveness of Holy Saturday.

If Easter Sunday was like that, Mary Magdalene didn't see it until later. John tells us that it was still dark when Mary went to the tomb. Finding the stone rolled away, she ran to Peter and John to tell them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." As devoted to Jesus as she was, Mary didn't grasp what had happened anymore than did the others.

What ensued next was a foot race. John arrived at the tomb first, stopped, looked in, saw the evidence of the resurrection, but did not enter. Perhaps he was trying to come to grips with what he had just seen. Peter came barreling along, brushed by John, and hurtled into the tomb. He also saw the evidence and was bewildered. John then did go in, looked again at the evidence, and believed. But both of them didn't know how it happened, nor even why. Despite being told by Jesus on several occasions that he must go to Jerusalem and die to be resurrected on the third day, they, like Mary, didn't get it. Following Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and the receiving of the Holy Spirit by them all, they certainly did get it, and then they and others began to transform the world with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Since then, billions of people have come to believe in our Lord. What I find intriguing is the efforts down through the ages to find physical evidence of Jesus' existence and his resurrection. The early church planted stone cathedrals on top of many of the sites of Jesus' life. Thus, in Bethlehem, there is the Church of the Nativity, where Jesus was born. There is also the Church of the Resurrection within the walls of old Jerusalem, built over Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, and it also contains the place where Jesus was buried.

While the Catholic Church believes these are the precise places of events in Jesus' life, in truth, we don't know for certain. Even so, visiting these sites was, for me, a profoundly moving experience. As for Jesus' tomb, there is also, just outside Jerusalem, a site called the Garden Tomb. I found this site to be the most compelling. Again, though, there is no assurance that it was where our Lord was buried.

But the search for evidence of the resurrection that I find most intriguing is the Shroud of Turin. It has been captivating researchers, as well as ordinary folks, since the 13th century. A piece of cloth fourteen feet long and four feet wide, it contains both the front and back image of a man lying prone with his hands crossed over his groin. The man has a beard and shoulder-length hair, and bears marks of having been crucified in the same manner as had Jesus.

In 1988, the Vatican allowed the Shroud to be carbon-dated. Three separate universities tested fragments independently and all concluded that the Shroud dated to the 1290-1390 period. But that didn't end the controversy. The carbon-dating has been challenged as not being from the Shroud itself, but from pieces of cloth that had been used in the Middle Ages to repair the Shroud.

All of this is intellectually fascinating, but everyone is looking for the evidence of the resurrection in the wrong places. Even if the Shroud, for example, was proven to date from the first century, there wouldn't be any way of knowing that the image was positively that of Jesus.

Where, then, do we look for the evidence of the resurrection? Not in scientific journals. We look for it in the hearts and lives of countless people throughout the last 2,000 years unto this very day who evidence the love of Christ in their words and deeds. You may be one, sitting here just knowing by faith in your heart that Jesus is the Son of God and he is your Lord and Savior. Your faith is a gift from God and is to be cherished.

Maybe you are new to exploring the faith and the gospel of Christ, but there is so much to learn and absorb, and you aren't sure about many things. Fear not. You are not alone. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, didn't accept Christ as his personal savior until many years into his priesthood. I spent several years being a self-avowed practicing Christian before I knew Christ in my heart. It can take time. The key is to invite the Lord to come into your heart, and to stay open to the movement of the Holy Spirit with you.

A story: an Irishman and his wife in their 70s had been attending church together their entire married life. The wife's name was Rosie; she was a devout Christian. His name was Sean; he was not. But he willingly went to church because he loved his wife and it pleased her for him to go. She was involved in mission work and other church programs; he was not, but he never complained about the time Rosie spent with the church. During fellowship time after each worship service, Rosie moved around visiting with friends. Sean stood in the background, but would talk cordially if someone approached him.

One day Rosie was diagnosed with cancer. She fought hard, but then died the week before Easter Sunday. Sean was devastated and stopped going to church. There wasn't any reason now that his sweet Rosie was gone. The church tried to reach out to him. At first, meals were taken to him and folks called on him. He received it all graciously, but quietly. After a few months, the outreach dwindled. The people at church occasionally remarked how they missed Rosie and Sean.

One year and one week later, the church again celebrated the resurrection of the Lord on Easter Sunday. As people were settling into their seats, in walked Sean. Heads turned. There were whispers. As he settled into a pew, some of folks around him shook his hand, welcoming him.

Quiet settled over the church and Easter worship began. Hymns were sung, prayers were said, scripture was read, and the word was proclaimed. Immediately after the pastor ended his homily, Sean stood up. Eyes turned. You could hear a pin drop. In a clear and strong voice he said, "I know that my Rosie lives." And then in a beautiful tenor voice he sang *My Wild Irish Rose*. As he sat down there wasn't a dry eye in the congregation. The pastor got up and said it was the most beautiful Easter hymn he had ever heard.

Are you looking for evidence of the resurrection? It's in the heart of someone nearby you. Perhaps, if you look carefully and honestly, it may be very close to being within your own heart. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 24 April 2011
[Easter Sunday]