

“DO YOU BELIEVE IT?”

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

preached Easter Sunrise - April 12, 2009

“Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!” Do you believe it? On the day when it happened, a few did believe, but multitudes did not. Some did not want to believe. Like Pilate. If he were to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead he would have to admit that there was something more powerful than the military might of Rome. He would have to acknowledge that his administrative efficiency was not as effective as he thought. The soldiers didn't have to do much, just nail him to a cross, keep him there till he died, and then watch the grave to make sure nothing happened to the lifeless body. If this Jesus were raised, it would send a message that Roman authority could be overcome. If this Jesus were raised the entire political order, all their power and authority could be brought into question. Pilate was not about to let that happen. The God of Israel could not be seen as being more powerful than Caesar. Pilate did not believe, he could not believe, he did not want to believe that Christ is risen. Do you believe it?

Some did not want to believe. Like the religious leaders of Jerusalem, the ones who brought charges against Jesus, the ones who forced the hand of Pilate. They claimed that Jesus was guilty of treason toward Caesar and blasphemy before the Lord. The crimes of Jesus were breaking the traditions of the Jews, questioning the order of their faith, and proclaiming himself the Son of God. If this Jesus were raised, it would mean that the Lord vindicated him and validated his message. If this Jesus were raised all the traditions that empowered them would be brought into question. The leaders could not allow that to happen. They were comfortable with those traditions. They derived their personal honor and power by maintaining those traditions. Those leaders did not believe, they could not believe, they did not want to believe that Christ is risen. Do you believe it?

Some did not want to believe. Like most of the Jews in Jerusalem. They were the ones who had the opportunity to set Jesus of Nazareth free. Instead the terrorist Barabbus was chosen. They thought that their freedom could be better attained by the violence of Barabbus than by the love of a prophetic healer from Galilee. They trusted human hands more than heavenly ones. If this Jesus were raised it would mean that they were wrong. If this Jesus were raised it would mean their view of life, their view of the world, their view of themselves would be brought into question. They could not take

the risk of admitting their fallibility. They could not admit that their ways were inferior to the ways of God. The multitudes did not believe, they could not believe, they didn't want to believe that Christ is risen. Do you believe it?

Some could not believe. Like the disciples. That sounds strange because Jesus told them that he would be rejected and killed by the chief priests and scribes. He told them that on the third day he would be raised. Jesus explained exactly what would happen, yet when he was rejected they were surprised. When he was arrested and killed, they were surprised. And when they were told that the grave was empty, that Jesus had risen, not only were they surprised, they would not believe it. If this Jesus were raised the disciples could no longer sit behind closed doors feeling sorry for themselves. Their source of self-pity would disappear. It would mean that they would have to become active, they would have to evangelize, to do the work that Jesus had always done for them. No longer did they have a free ride on this spiritual trek. If Jesus were raised, all the responsibility for carrying the gospel would be theirs. If Jesus were raised all the risk in carrying the gospel would be theirs as well. The disciples did not believe, they could not believe, they did not want to believe that Christ is risen. Do you believe it?

Even since that first Easter, thousands, even millions have denied the resurrection. Every year thousands climb a mountain in the Italian Alps where shrines commemorate the stations of the cross. The path leads to a crucifix. One tourist noticed a little trail that led beyond the cross. He fought through the brush and to his great surprise came upon another shrine, one that symbolized the empty tomb. It was neglected. Almost everyone had gone to the cross and stopped. Far too often we come to the cross, we feel the despair and heartbreak, and there we stop. Do you not know that if we end our search with a death on the cross we gain nothing? What good does it do to have our sins forgiven if we go back to the same sinful lifestyle, if we return to the same dark world of despair? Yet that is what we often do.

The joy of Easter does not come just in knowing our sins are forgiven. The power of Easter is in the hope of what is yet to come, a new life in Christ apart from sin; a new opportunity to walk with God; a new chance to live in the righteousness of Jesus. But to seize the hope, to truly believe in the risen Christ, we must be willing to take some risks. We have to be willing to question our world view. We have to be willing to question the traditions we uphold. We have to be willing to challenge the political and economic order that rules us. We have to be willing to challenge our complacency, our inactivity. We have to be willing to accept that we are not the master of our domain,

that there is One who knows more, who understand more than we do. If we are to believe in the risen Christ we need to accept a call to action, a call to go with Jesus into all the world to challenge others, to call them to faith, and many in the world are not willing to do that. Many are satisfied to remain the passive victims of governments, logic, and traditions that can keep us hiding in fear and pity.

A certain African antelope can leap 10 feet high and 30 feet long. Yet a zoo will keep them behind a three foot fence. They will not jump over the fence if they cannot see where they will land. Out of fear and uncertainty they remained imprisoned. Many Christians share the same fate. It is comfortable to proclaim Christ's death for our sin. That gives us license to remain just as we are. If we take a leap in faith, if we take the risk to believe in the risen Christ we give the license of our lives back to Jesus, to call us, to direct us, to move us, and we do not know where Christ will lead. And so we allow logic, tradition, and all the comfortable ways in which we live to keep us in our place. We define our existence by what we cannot do. We accept the fact that Christ died for our sins, but are we ready to affirm, to proclaim, to believe, to live in the risen Christ? For when we believe, then we begin to act as though we cannot be defeated, for even death cannot hold us. Then there is no fear, and there are no limits to what we can accomplish for Christ and in Christ.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Do you believe it? Are you willing to take a leap in faith, to allow the risen Christ to carry you into the world, to allow Jesus to make a difference in your world? Are you ready to challenge all the rules and regulations, all the habits and traditions that keep us from accomplishing what Christ calls us to do? Are you tired of a life in sin and despair? Are you ready for a new life in the love and joy of Jesus? Then do not be silent! Tear down the walls of fear and tradition. Kick aside the logic that keeps you languishing. Inundate the comfortable order of inactivity. And hold on to the hope of salvation. Take a risk to proclaim the resurrection. Jump to the joy of a new beginning. Leap to live in the liberation of the living Lord. And go forth to declare to the world, "Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! And nothing shall be the same anymore." Go forth to show the world, to change the world, to build God's kingdom in the world. Go forth to be the body of the risen Christ in this world. Now and forevermore! In your life may it be so! Amen!