

November 23, 2014

TEXT: Ephesians 1:15-23

TITLE: A Faithful Response to Jesus

We are blessed to be a growing congregation, which means that we offer classes about five times a year for potential new members (such as the class meeting later today). Many people considering joining ELPC ask basic questions like “How long has the church been here? How many friends and members do you have? Can anyone take communion?” By the way, the answers to those questions are: since 1819, about 800, and yes, anyone can take communion. Sometimes, though, after the class someone will pull me aside and say, “Look, I like Jesus. I’m just not so sure about the Son of God part.” That statement usually requires a longer conversation, but the general topic is one we should discuss together. Because even if you’re not wondering the same thing about Jesus, someone near you in the pew or outside those doors certainly is.

What can a modern person believe about Jesus Christ? Let’s start by considering the four verbs commonly associated with Jesus: he lived, he died, he was raised from the dead, and he ascended into heaven. He lived: Jesus was a carpenter from Nazareth who in time became a miracle worker and itinerant rabbi during the years when Tiberius was Emperor of Rome. That much is reported by ancient historians and gospel writers, who then go further and also acknowledge that this same Jesus of Nazareth was killed by crucifixion outside the city walls of Jerusalem around the year 30 CE.

The next two verbs move from the realm of pure history to a category combining history and faith. Every Easter we announce Jesus was raised from the dead, and written bible records affirm that many people encountered the risen Christ. The choir will now demonstrate how this Easter news is often proclaimed in church. (Refrain from “Low in the Grave He Lay.”) Now, if we are going to faithfully follow Jesus Christ, we have to be careful what verbs we use to talk about him – and this hymn uses the wrong verb. The choir sang, “Up from the grave He arose” – an active verb for the resurrection. Yet the scripture and creeds are clear: Jesus didn’t rise by his own power. He was dead yet on Easter he was raised from the dead – a passive verb form to stress how by God’s grace and power Jesus the crucified was raised to new life. Jesus wasn’t a super hero, triumphing over his foes by his own awesome power and strength. God’s very being, God’s love and grace, dwelt in Jesus for us. Yet God refused to let the cross and death be the final word on this subject. So Jesus was raised from the dead. Precisely how this happened is a mystery of faith. Yet in embracing that mystery, our intellectual and spiritual natures come together and find themselves connected in a bond of faith that contains truth about the meaning of life today and for all eternity.

The last verb also works the same way. He who was raised then ascended into heaven. It is a mystery impossible to comprehend through categories of space

and time as we know them. Yet there's something about it that rings true. God in Christ descended, died, was raised, then ascended back to complete the circle while touching all of creation along the way of this circular route. All through human history, people have asked about the nature of God and how God is involved in our life here in earth. So in the fullness of time, the Christian story unfolded – a story built around those four simple verbs moving in a sacred circle. It is to the God in Christ of that story we seek to faithfully respond this day.

We're not the first generation of people to have questions about Jesus Christ. Long ago, Paul and the writers of the New Testament letters spent a lot of time trying to explain how the Jesus who lived and died is the Christ who was resurrected and ascended to the right hand of God. Listen again to the patient way this topic is discussed in the first chapter of Ephesians. It begins: *I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward others. For this reason I give thanks for you and remember you in my prayers.* That's all well and good and quite complimentary. But Paul knows that faith is a lifelong process, so he goes on to say something like this: *I pray that God gives you a spirit of wisdom as you come to know Jesus so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened (spirit and intellect combined) you may know the hope, the riches and the power of faith.* Paul prays that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will once again roll away the heavy stones of doubt and skepticism so that the light of faith may shine in upon our spirits and resurrect in us a lasting, powerful, and living faith.

To give us encouragement about this, Paul goes on to talk about the exaltation of Christ – how the One raised from the dead is now seated at God's right hand above all power and authority in the present time and for all eternity. Again, it is a mystery to ponder – the humanity of Jesus taken up into the divinity and eternity of heaven itself, so that a part of us is now fully with God forever. How are we supposed to wrap our head around this paradox of faith? You're can't unless you are willing to use both your head and your heart in the process. Let me suggest two ways you can go about this.

First, think about buildings that are too large to see in a single glance: the Cathedral of Learning, the Eiffel Tower, oh, I don't know, East Liberty Presbyterian Church. You step forward to look at the details in the stonework or the carvings over the doors. You step back to look up at the steeple, the vaulted ceiling or stained glass windows. This happens all the time in life – we move in for close-up views; we step back for wider perspectives on things. Why wouldn't we do the same thing about matters of faith? We step forward and imagine Jesus of Nazareth teaching on the hillside, reaching out with compassion to the leper, the blind man, the woman with a flow of blood. But we also step back and consider how someone can be fully human and fully divine, embodying a power different from all worldly power. Combining these two images allows us to see in a mirror dimly both Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus the Christ, who with God and the Holy Spirit is in, through, and yet over and above all earthly things.

Faith resides in the place of tension that holds these two perspectives together. Faith comes alive when we consciously choose to do two things - walk beside Jesus and worship Christ. For in the mystery of God's love these two things are truly one: Jesus the Christ. To quote Ephesians again: May a spirit of wisdom and revelation come to us that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened to believe this good news.

Second, I'll share a story that involves the astronaut Buzz Aldrin, who was one of the first men to walk on the moon and also was a Presbyterian elder, a member of Webster Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas. Now if ever there was a person caught between the earthly and the heavenly, it was Buzz Aldrin – especially at that moment when he sat in the spaceship on the lunar surface. Having just landed on the moon, Buzz Aldrin called Mission Command and said: *This is the Landing Module pilot. I would like to request a few moments of silence and I ask every person listening to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his or her own way.* And then he switched off the radio. Aldrin had earlier asked his pastor if there was something special he could do on the moon. After going to radio silence, Aldrin reached into his personal supplies and pulled out little plastic packages that contained bread and wine. He poured the wine into a chalice given to him by the church, noting that in the 1/6th gravity of the moon, the wine slowly curled and gracefully arched on the side of the cup. Then he quietly read a verse of scripture and was the first person to celebrate the Lord's Supper away from earth.

I love the simplicity of this story – the adrenalin and awe mingling in Aldrin's heart as they sat there after successfully landing on the moon and how he chose to add to the mystery of space the larger mystery of God's love made known in Jesus Christ. But what I love even more is the scripture Aldrin chose to read at that moment: Nothing triumphant or bombastic. No "Hallelujah chorus." Aldrin pulled out a handwritten note and read these simple words from John 15:5 – *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

A faithful response to Jesus Christ is to recognize first that almost everything about Jesus is mysterious and humbling. Even the verbs that describe him are a combination of head-knowledge and heart-knowledge. As we embrace the mystery of his life, we find ourselves enfolded in a story, a good news and grace that will not let us go. Which is why we still share this story and worship this Savior today.

And what is involved in following Jesus? I could point to lots of things – church worship, prayer, bible study, activism. But perhaps the first step is as simple as the words Buzz Aldrin spoke 45 years ago on the moon, saying out loud: *Jesus, you are the vine, we are the branches. Apart from you I can do nothing. Lord Christ, live with me, through me, this day and always.* That, my friends, is enough. Thanks be to God.