

A Monk Explains Easter

A Sermon by Dr. Neil Chadwick

I realize that Easter is past, but let me ask you a question. Where did the name "Easter" come from? Those who are only familiar with the King James Version of the Bible would quickly answer, "The name 'Easter' is from the Bible". And actually, the word can be found there once, but it's not found in more recent versions because the translation is not a good one. On the other hand, there was a monk who lived 1300 years ago who explained in his writings where the name "Easter" came from. His name was "Venerable Bede", and he explained why this Church holiday celebrating the resurrection of Christ was called Easter.

This ancient Christian Monk explained that the title Easter was used in connection with the Anglo-Saxon goddess called Eostre or Ostara. This was the goddess of spring, to be worshipped at the time of the vernal, or spring, equinox. It's pretty easy to see that this goddess, and the symbolism around her, closely corresponds to the springtime themes of rebirth, new life, new hope, and light - some of the very themes associated with the story of the resurrection.

But who is this goddess Eostre? According to the legend, she saved a bird whose wings were frozen from the harsh winter by turning the bird into a rabbit. However, it was a magical rabbit who could actually lay eggs. Also, because rabbits reproduce so rapidly, they are often associated with fertility. Consequently, we have today Easter Bunnies, Easter Eggs and a celebration of Spring, none of which is directly related to the true meaning of this greatest of all Christian holidays - the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

So if we want to distance ourselves from this pagan goddess of Easter, it would probably be better to call this holiday something else. From now on, let's call it the "Resurrection Celebration". But that means that we must be ready to believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead, we must believe in the resurrection. Now that's not an easy thing for some people to do. But don't worry, if you have trouble believing in resurrection, if that applies to you, you're in good company.

One of the outstanding features of the first Easter Sunday, or "Resurrection Day", was the unbelief of the disciples. When you think about it, this is quite amazing - Old Testament Scriptures predicted the resurrection; Jesus had told his disciples that He would rise again on the third day; they found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty; but still they did not believe.

Consider for example, the two people whom Jesus met up with on the road to Emaus, a little town northwest of Jerusalem (Luke 24:25). These two followers of Jesus were giving up, going home - even after hearing others say that Jesus was alive. When Jesus accompanied them on their 7 mile walk, they didn't at first recognize who He was, but He responded to their doubt by teaching them the

Scriptures, and when He broke the bread before supper, He opened their eyes so they could believe.

The women who had gone to the tomb early in the morning had reported to the "Eleven" remaining disciples that Jesus was alive, but these women were not believed. (Luke 24:11) However, I think Jesus knew that His disciples were filled with doubt, so he responded to this doubt by visiting them where they had gathered together in a locked up room. According to Mark 16:14, this was the most confrontive response by Jesus. It says: "Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. "

When Jesus met with his disciples in the upper room, Luke tells us, "They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?'" (Luke 24:37-41)

Again, Jesus responded to their lack of faith, He offered to show his wounds, and He ate right there in front of them. You see, Jesus understands the human doubt that we all experience from time to time. And he works with that, He responds.

Then there was the dramatic meeting with Thomas. Though the doors were locked, "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" (John 20:25-29)

Now let's not be too hard on Thomas, at least he was honest with his doubts. Jesus responded to this by inviting Thomas to touch his wounds. He wanted to give Thomas every opportunity to overcome doubt and fully believe that Jesus was alive again. And also notice that a special blessing was pronounced on future generations of believers, those like us who do not have the opportunity to touch the Lord's wounds physically. Praise God, that includes you and me. Because of God's love for you and me, we can actually know that He is alive.

You see, even though Jesus chided the disciples for their lack of faith, He also accommodated their unbelief, He worked with it, and helped them overcome it.

How did He do this? Jesus provided three things to help His disciples overcome their doubts and believe in Him:

First, Jesus offered proof of His bodily resurrection. But before going into that, there's something else we must accept. That is, Jesus really did die on that cross. There are some who have tried to make us believe that He merely passed out, and then revived in the cool damp air of the tomb and was rescued by His disciples. That

can't be farther from the truth.

A number of years ago a Medical Doctor, C. Truman Davis, wrote a description of the physical aspects of the crucifixion. After hearing this, no doubt can be left that Jesus really did die a terrible and agonizing death. Let me read a little from his article:

As the ". . . the crucifixion begins, Simon is ordered to place the patibulum (cross bar) on the ground and Jesus is quickly thrown backward with His shoulders against the wood. The legionnaire feels for the depression at the front of the wrist. He drives a heavy, square, wrought-iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. Quickly, he moves to the other side and repeats the action, being careful not to pull the arms too tightly, but to allow some flexion and movement. The cross bar is then lifted in place at the top of the stipes.

The left foot is pressed backward against the right foot, and with both feet extended, toes down, a nail is driven through the arch of each, leaving the knees moderately flexed. The victim is now crucified. As He slowly sags down with more weight on the nails in the wrists, excruciating, fiery pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms to explode in the brain - the nails in the wrists are putting pressure on the median nerves. As He pushes Himself upward to avoid this stretching torment, He places His full weight on the nail through His feet. Again there is the searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves between the metatarsal bones of the feet.

At this point, another phenomenon occurs. As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs, but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically, He is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen.

"Hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber. Then another agony begins. A deep crushing pain deep in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart.

"It is now almost over - the loss of tissue fluids has reached a critical level - the compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues - the tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. The markedly dehydrated tissues send their flood of stimuli to the brain. Jesus gasps, "I thirst."

The body of Jesus is now in extremis, and He can feel the chill of death creeping through His tissues. This realization brings out the words "It is finished" - possibly in little more than a tortured whisper. "With one last surge of strength, He once again presses His torn feet against the nail, straightens His legs, takes a deeper

breath, and utters His last cry, "Father, into they hands I commit my spirit."

"In order that the Sabbath not be profaned, the Jews asked that the condemned men be dispatched and removed from the crosses. The common method of ending a crucifixion was by crurefracture, the breaking of the bones of the legs. This prevented the victim from pushing himself upward; the tension could not be relieved from the muscles of the chest, and rapid suffocation occurred. The legs of the two thieves were broken, but when they came to Jesus they saw that this was unnecessary.

Apparently to make doubly sure of death, the legionnaire drove his lance through the fifth interspace between the ribs, upward through the pericardium and into the heart. The Gospel according to St. John reports: "And immediately there came out blood and water." Thus there was an escape of watery fluid from the sac surrounding the heart and blood from the interior of the heart. We, therefore, have rather conclusive postmortem evidence that our Lord died, not the usual crucifixion death by suffocation, but of heart failure due to shock and constriction of the heart by fluid in the pericardium."

Yes, Jesus died an awful, but full and complete death. He didn't just pass out for a while, then revive. His was not a "near death" experience.

When, three days later, Jesus appeared to His disciples, He knew they would have a hard time believing that He was alive again. So He showed them His hands and His feet. He allowed them to touch Him. He ate with them. It's very important for us to accept this fully. When Jesus rose again, His wasn't just a spirit resurrection. It wasn't something which the disciples could possibly attribute to their own imaginations. They saw Him, they touched Him, they ate food with Him. I want you to understand how very important this is. It represents one of the most important teachings of the Christian church. In fact, no one should refer to themselves as a "Christian" unless they are willing to accept this truth.

The second way Jesus worked with the doubts of the disciples was by giving them an understanding of Scripture. He explained that His being the Messiah, the Savior, was in fulfillment of prophecy. You may say to me today that you would like to believe, but you have a hard timer doing that. Here's what to do. Take time to read and study the Bible. It's as simple as that. The Apostle Paul said, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." And he was right. At one point Paul applauded the new Christians in the Greek city of Berea because when he preached the Gospel to them, they took time to look through the Bible for themselves. (Acts 17:11)

I want to put this challenge to you today. Read the Bible. If you don't have one, call me and I will see to it that you get one. Read it carefully, read it prayerfully - I promise you that as you read, faith will begin to rise in your heart and mind. You will begin to believe again, and accepting the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ will bring about a dramatic change in your life.

Thirdly, to help the first disciples get over their doubts, Jesus met them personally,

He provided them with a personal encounter. It wasn't enough for them to merely have been told by someone else. It wasn't even enough for them to have a vision of Jesus. They needed to experience the presence of Jesus for themselves. They needed to know, beyond every possible doubt, that Jesus was truly alive and would be with them forever. Jesus made sure that they "knew that they knew". He was aware that they would be persecuted for their faith in Him.

If you were in church last Sunday, there's a good possibility that you sang the song, "He Lives". Notice the closing words of this song, "You ask me how I know He lives, He lives within my heart." I do hope you were in church last Sunday, Easter Sunday, but I also hope you have been or will be in church today. But whether or not it's possible for you to be in church, there's something more important - it's more important that you have a personal relationship with Jesus. He wants to meet with you.

As with many of our special holidays, Easter has taken on many extra meanings that were never intended in the first place. There's no such thing as a bird turned into a rabbit and laying eggs! The "Resurrection of Jesus" is the meaning of Easter. Do you believe? Right now I want to pray with you. No doubt you've heard about Jesus, and you've known that He was resurrected. But right now it's time to go beyond hearing and knowing, it's time to believe.