

Sermon by The Rev. Jay Sidebotham

Easter Day, March 23, 2008

One Sunday, as people were leaving church, a kid asked me this question: "Is heaven a place or a feeling?" It caught me off guard. Like a good Episcopalian, I offered the answer with most wiggle room and said: "It's both." I added that it's complicated and mysterious. I'm not convinced my questioner was satisfied. But I was grateful because in its simplicity, the question made me think about what I believed. *All of us who spend a lot of time around church need that kind of refresher every now and then. Holy Week may well serve that purpose.* It brought to mind a story about Robert Coles, the noted psychiatrist, who worked with children probing their religious and spiritual thoughts. He was interviewing two young girls from a Roman Catholic family, Mary and Theresa. They spoke about religion and church, and the subject turned to heaven. Theresa asked Dr. Coles this question: "Do you believe in heaven - and Jesus there?" Coles quickly responded "I'd like to." Mary joined in and

asked: "But do you?" As he hesitated, Theresa turned to her sister and shook her head and said, "He's not sure."

These kinds of questions are not new. We heard a portion of a letter to the Colossians, a first century community eager to make sense of faith in the risen Christ who they could not see, to make sense of belief in Easter, just like we do here today. The letter includes this Easter invitation "Seek the things that are above. Set your mind on things above." It's an invitation to figure out what it means to believe in Easter. That's been the challenge for people of faith from the time of the early church to this gathering here, as we explore faith at work in our homes, in the workplace, with neighbors who may or may not be easy to love, with people of other faiths. On this special day, we might frame the question this way: What do we really believe about Easter?

I got a wonderful email last week, the work of a priest named Mark Feather, who reflected on what Episcopalians believe. He wrote: Episcopalians believe in miracles, particularly during Every Member Canvass for stewardship, or when electing bishops, or recruiting church school teachers. Episcopalians believe that

anything worth doing is especially worth doing if it has an obscure title (e.g. sexton, thurifer, suffragan, rector, warden). *Episcopalians believe in Scripture, tradition and reason. While they aren't sure what they believe about these three things, there's almost universal agreement that that is hardly the point.* Episcopalians firmly believe that coffee hour is a sacrament, but only if the coffee is caffeinated. Episcopalians believe that they are the only people God trusts enough to take the summers off from Church. Some Episcopalians believe Rite I is best. Others believe Rite II is better, but all Episcopalians hope the whole thing gets over by noon. But he didn't say what Episcopalians believe about Easter.

We are no doubt a people of faith. How else can you explain celebrating a feast called Easter, a term which comes from an Anglo-Saxon reference to "spring" when we're digging out from a foot of snow? Our belief in Easter is reflected in the fact that we consider every Sunday a feast of the resurrection, in other words, a little Easter. That's why during Lent, Sundays are exempt from fasting, and why, at least in my book, it's okay to break fast on those days. Apologies if that news comes too late for those of you who've been

chocolate deprived. The measure of the depth of our belief in Easter is seen as we gather for a service of burial. Our prayer book calls the liturgy for the dead an Easter liturgy, finding its meaning in the resurrection. In life's toughest patch, we say we believe that because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised, based on the words of St. Paul who said nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not even death. Can we believe that? Maybe that's the question of the day. We could argue that without the story of Easter, we would not be here, because the story of Jesus was only passed on because his disciples were so convinced he'd risen that they were willing to die for that message. Without Easter, he'd have been one of thousands put to death on a cross, anonymous and pathetic, lost to history. And we'd be wasting our time here.

As Owen Meany says: Easter is the main event. Easter shapes who we are. That doesn't mean we can fully understand it or explain it. It doesn't erase fear or doubt, or require us to check our brains at the door. *Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. That's why we read about doubting Thomas every year on the first Sunday after Easter.* Maybe you feel like Robert Coles, as I do some days, hoping to believe but not

sure. But we believe Easter made the difference, to the first dispirited disciples, and to Christians today. That belief changes the way we live in this world, the way we look at the world. It makes us look up. It makes us look forward. Like the first disciples, it does not remove us from engagement in this world. It's not pie in the sky. Rather, Easter belief represents the most faithful way to live in the world right now. Emily Dickinson put it this way: "Abdication of belief makes the behavior small." C. S. Lewis wrote: "Those who are most conscious of another world have made the most effective Christians in this one."

Today's celebration puts us on the spot, the way that young child's question put me on the spot. For each of us, whether regular communicants, or visitors, or seekers, or graciously here to please a family member, the question of this day is this: what do we believe about Easter? Not just what does the church believe. What do you believe? What do I believe? To answer that, we join two women each named Mary on their way to the tomb, weighed down by questions that come with any dramatic reversal or deep loss. Maybe you come here weighed down as well. There is an earthquake. An angel

descends. Strong, macho soldiers fall over in a dead faint. The women hear of resurrection. The whole thing makes them afraid. But it also offers them a way to move forward when they thought they were at a dead end. They believe the good news, and are sent into the world to share it. And as they leave, in fear, confusion, doubt and amazement, they meet Jesus himself. He speaks to them. They know he is alive. They worship him. What about you? Can you hear that news today, that Jesus is alive? That he addresses you in your spiritual journey? That he calls you into relationship? That he calls you to do his work in the world?

Easter belief calls us to look up, to look forward to meeting the living Jesus, to a deepened relationship with God, unfolding now in each of our spiritual journeys, through the love and power that raised Jesus from the dead on Easter, calling us to show his love and power now. That's the difference we believe Easter makes. And because of that, we are able, at the end of a long and snowy Lenten season, to begin and end our worship with resounding Alleluias, to say what we believe in these simple words: Alleluia, Christ is risen.

