

The First Day  
 A sermon by Anna Pinckney Straight  
 For Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
 April 16, 2017, Easter!

**Jeremiah 31:1-6**

<sup>1</sup>At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.

<sup>2</sup> Thus says the LORD:

The people who survived the sword  
 found grace in the wilderness;  
 when Israel sought for rest,

<sup>3</sup> the LORD appeared to him from far away.

I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
 therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

<sup>4</sup> Again I will build you, and you shall be built,  
 O virgin Israel!

Again you shall take your tambourines,  
 and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.

<sup>5</sup> Again you shall plant vineyards  
 on the mountains of Samaria;  
 the planters shall plant,  
 and shall enjoy the fruit.

<sup>6</sup> For there shall be a day when sentinels will call  
 in the hill country of Ephraim:

"Come, let us go up to Zion,  
 to the LORD our God."

**John 20:1-18**

<sup>1</sup>Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The Easter Baskets are full, but the tomb is empty.<sup>1</sup>  
 Today we remember the singularly defining moment of our faith-  
 Christ's resurrection

It's also the story of Christian faith that raises questions for those who think as well as feel their faith.

After all, resurrection doesn't fit in any scientific manual we can find,  
 and the texts for Easter aren't metaphorical or allegorical.

They aren't speaking in parables,  
 They are telling their truth.

Jesus was dead, and now  
 Jesus is risen.

Jesus died.  
 Really died.  
 Descended to the dead.  
 And now he lives.

Christ is Risen- **He is Risen Indeed!**

Now, if you are struggling with that.  
 If you are struggling with resurrection.  
 With the idea of God.  
 With questions.  
 With faith.  
 With church.

I want to say, as I've said before and will say again, that's okay.

Not only is it okay. It's good. This is the place for you to be.

Doubt belongs in church.

Andrea Palpant Dilley talks about the questions that, as a young adult, drove her away from church. She writes:

Why does the church seem so culturally insulated and dysfunctional? Why does God seem distant and uninvolved? And most of all, why does God allow suffering?

These questions didn't come out of nowhere. I'd spent time in high school volunteering in refugee camps in Kenya and in college working with families on welfare in central Washington. I saw hungry babies. I walked into homes that were piled with garbage and dirty laundry....

I had to leave the church to find the church. And when I came back, the return wasn't clean or conclusive. Since then, I've come to believe that my doubts belong inside the space of the sanctuary....

With all its faults, I still associate the church with the pursuit of truth and justice, with community and shared humanity. It's a place to ask the unanswerable questions and a place to

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, pastors get a little obsessed about getting ready for Easter worship. Thank you John Crist for this reminder to lighten up a little.... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XsrJ3687aM>

be on sojourn. No other institution has given me what the church has: a space to search for God."

Yes, you can doubt. And yes. Doubts belong in church.

But today, on Easter Sunday, we are reminded, it's good to believe, too.  
To believe in resurrection.

To believe in this thing that never should have happened, did happen, because of God's love for us.  
A love that changes not just a few things, it changes,  
when we pay attention, everything.

For Simon Peter and the beloved disciple (was it Lazarus or was it John?)  
who run back to the tomb once alerted that the stone has been moved by Mary Magdelene.

For the women who run and tell.

For Jesus, who was mistaken for the gardener, calling out to those he loved,  
those he no doubt missed,  
and reminded them that they couldn't hold onto him,  
they couldn't go back, they must continue to move forward.<sup>2</sup>

Christianity is not a finished article [Harry Emerson Fosdick preached many years ago], a static system; it is a growing movement.... Because it is a growing, living, vital thing, it never has been quite the same thing in any two generations.... but so long as its roots are in the spirit of Jesus let it grow, for its leaves shall be for the healing of the nations... Christianity can be to us...that far nobler thing, a river, whose fountains are in the life of Jesus, whose flowing is the spirit of Jesus, an ever growing, enlarging stream.....We cannot be static disciples of an advancing Lord.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus, on this first morning of the week. The third day, now the first day,  
Continues to advance, and continues to call us to follow.  
To believe. To proclaim. To act.

And someday belief is easier than others, isn't it?

I imagine that for the family of Rod Carew, believing in resurrection will come easily this year. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> D. Mark Davis, "Seeing Jesus through a Veil of Tears"

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/03/seeing-jesus-through-veil-of-tears.html>

<sup>3</sup> From a sermon entitled "Progressive Christianity" preached on May 8, 1921. Found in *A Preaching Ministry: Twenty-One Sermons Preaching by Harry Emerson Fosdick at The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 1918-1925*. New York: The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 2000. Pages 156 - 172.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/14/health/rod-carew-heart-transplant-nfl-player-trnd/index.html>

<http://www.oregister.com/2017/04/14/konrad-carew-how-an-nfl-players-donated-heart-saved-life-of-a-baseball-hall-of-famer-2/>

Rod Carew a baseball hall-of-famer with 3,053 career hits.<sup>5</sup>

And a hero to Konrad Reuland.

They met when Reuland was a child. It was a defining moment for him, one of the moments that led Reuland grew up to play sports, too.

When he grew up, Konrad Reuland played for the NFL, the Ravens and the Jets.

Carew had a heart attack in September of 2015,

a serious heart attack that damaged his heart beyond repair.

He was put on the transplant list, and he waited, knowing that his heart wouldn't make it much longer.

Konrad Reuland, on the other hand, was vigorously healthy,

until December 12, 2016 when he collapsed and died due to a brain aneurysm.

Konrad Reuland's organs were donated, and Rod Carew received his heart.

Now, organ donors and recipients are not known by name. but

{Daniel Brown of the Orange County Register tells the story}

By the time of the funeral, friends who had read about Rod Carew's recent heart transplant in Los Angeles were putting two and two together. They pulled [Konrad Reuland's mother] Mary aside and asked if it was possible: Do you think Konrad saved Carew? Did the heart of an NFL player wind up in the chest of a baseball Hall of Famer?

Mary hadn't considered that prospect before, but she was instantly overcome with the feeling it had to be true. So after a flurry of back-channel texts and e-mails, she wrangled a phone number for Carew's wife, Rhonda, and left an improbable message: "This is Mary Reuland," she said. "And I think your husband may have my son's heart and kidney..."

So began the journey of two Orange County families now intertwined as one. The Reulands and the Carews, bound by a single heart, have joined forces to fight cardiovascular disease and to promote organ donation.

They are going public, both families said, because they believe Konrad has deemed it so. Sometimes Carew sits at Reuland's gravesite and talks it out.

"I just thank him for saving my life and putting a roaring heart inside my body," the 18-time All-Star said. "We have a long way to go together."

Carew already had a partnership with the American Heart Association, a campaign launched a year ago and named after his uniform number with the Minnesota Twins and California Angels. It's called "The Heart of 29."

Konrad Reuland was 29 when he died.

When the families met in person for the first time.... one of the first things Mary did was lean her head against Carew's chest. Using a stethoscope to eavesdrop on a miracle, she listened hard as Carew took deep and purposeful breaths.

Her face turned crimson and, reflexively, she wrapped her arms around Carew's neck. She was hugging a stranger. She was hugging her son.

"Does it sound the same?" Rhonda [Carew's wife] asked, quietly.

Mary nodded through the tears.

"I've got it memorized," she replied.

SUMMARY		WAR	AB	H	HR	R	RBI	SB	BA	OBP	SLG	OPS	OPS+
Career		81.1	9315	3053	92	1424	1015	353	.328	.393	.429	.822	131

For the Carews and the Reulands, they are living their own story of resurrection. And there are days when that belief is easy and natural and as clear as a heart beat.

But I also know that all days aren't like that, and belief is less obvious.

Christians in Egypt were bombed on Palm Sunday while celebrating Christ's entry into Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> Gay men are being targeted and tortured in Chechnya.<sup>7</sup> 35 mosques in the United States of America have been attacked, defaced, threatened in the first few months of this year alone, doubling the same statistics from last year.<sup>8</sup>

How many more bombs will be dropped and how many more people will go hungry and what kind of budget West Virginia can adopt that will put us on a road that feels less shaky?

Believing in the resurrection of Jesus, the hope that Jesus's resurrection proclaims doesn't always come naturally..

Theologian Paul Raushenbush posted this on Facebook yesterday:<sup>9</sup>

I'm waiting to feel Easter this year. That moment when I shout with that particular joy, and laugh with that particular freedom that comes from a certainty within my soul that what we say - that love is more powerful than death - is actually true.

Because, today, I don't know that it is true.

Because today as hearts break and bombs drop and leaders betray and bonds fray, I don't see love overcoming anything, and there is, deep within my soul, a despair that I can't shake, won't shake, because I know, for too many souls, death is real.....

I'm waiting to feel Easter this year. But perhaps, Easter is waiting for me - to come out of my safety and to risk, to stand, to insist on life; as those women did so long ago, daring to defy, to seek out and to care, even for a corpse - even unto death. The women, who stayed with Jesus at the cross, and who had no expectations of joy after the killing but understood that duty and love extend beyond death into that which is eternal and whose faith led them to that encounter with angels and with life, and with love.

Sometimes belief comes to us, and sometimes it waits for us to seek it.

Sometimes, belief in resurrection is as natural as the air we breathe,  
and sometimes,  
we choose to believe.

There is a wonderful choral anthem by Mark Miller- I hope that you will google it- I'll post a link in the sermon that goes up on the Old Stone Church Web Site<sup>10</sup>- entitled "I Believe." The music illuminates the words  
Words scratched on the walls of a cellar in Cologne, Germany by a Jew hiding from Nazi persecution.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/04/09/world/middleeast/09reuters-egypt-violence.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/01/world/europe/chechen-authorities-arresting-and-killing-gay-men-russian-paper-says.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/01/opinion/sunday/why-is-this-hate-different-from-all-other-hate.html>

<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/20/us/mosques-targeted-2017-trnd/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Raushenbush?pnref=story.unseen-section> I am editing for brevity- the entire post is public and worth reading....

<sup>10</sup> "I Believe" by Mark A. Miller, Sung By Harmonium Choral Society on 3/2/14

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qfeb7dlChmE>

I Believe - Mark Miller - GPC Exultation Youth Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsTu6MV8jfU>

I believe in the sun even when it's not shining.  
 I believe in love even when I don't feel it.  
 I believe in God even when God is silent.

That's our task and our gift and our privilege today.  
 To choose to believe and then to live into that belief.

And I know that's no little thing.

Stanley Hauerwas puts it this way:<sup>11</sup>

Being a Christian should just scare the hell out of us. It's like on Sunday we need to rush together for protection. "Oh, I'm not crazy." That we believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world is craziness. It's going to make your life really weird. And you just need to get together on Sunday to be pulled back into the reality of God's kingdom.

Today, we are front and center in God's kingdom.  
 Where the gardener isn't the gardener, it's Jesus.  
 And not only is he **not** dead, he's on the loose.<sup>12</sup>

And with this reminder that, with God, all things are possible, we are reminded not only of just how much work there is to do, we are also reminded that it begins here, and now, with the community of faith.

A community that started with just a few lives being changed, because some had belief and some chose to believe.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb."

Amen.  
 Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> "Sunday Asylum: Being the Church in Occupied Territory," page 81. First seen in this article:  
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ponderanew/2016/03/13/killing-the-church-with-sunday-school/>

<sup>12</sup> Hat-tip to Kim McNeill who, every year, posts "Jesus is on the Loose! Happy Easter!"