

The events we celebrate today are at the very heart of Christian faith. The apostle Paul said that if Christ has not been raised, then our faith is in vain.

The resurrection is the central feature that sets Christianity apart from other faiths. But what is it? What exactly is resurrection faith?

It's not just believing in the empty tomb. Matthew's gospel tells us that there was an explanation circulating that the body had been stolen.

It's not believing that people can be raised from the dead, because those who witnessed the little girl being raised from the dead – and those who witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead...these witnesses are not described as having resurrection faith.

It's not even just believing that Jesus came back to life after he had been dead for a few days, because Matthew again tells us that the guards and the chief priests actually knew that that had happened. The guards in fact were the only eye witnesses to the resurrection. But the guards and the priests formed a conspiracy to suppress the information and thus they certainly aren't examples of resurrection faith, even though they knew that Jesus had come back to life.

Resurrection faith is also not about a belief about a certain concept of the resurrection. The appearances of the risen Christ are described in so many different ways in the gospels that it is impossible to hold onto any one detailed explanation of the resurrection and still make sense of them all.

In some accounts of Jesus' resurrection we read that Jesus was unrecognizable – like Mary Magdalene assuming Jesus was a gardener – in the Gospel of John, or, like Cleopas and his friends not recognizing Jesus while he walked with them on the road to Emmaus. In other accounts we read that many knew him instantly. Like in the gospel of John when Peter sees and recognizes the risen Jesus cooking fish on the shore.

So seeing and believing, and seeing and not believing at first doesn't determine resurrection faith. So then, what is resurrection faith?

The book of Exodus tells us that the Hebrew people became slaves. Pharaoh forced them to do unbearable work under duress - and when they complained he had all their male babies killed.

And if you know anything about human psychology and people who suffer under abuse, then you won't be surprised to know that many of them were quite happy with their slavery. Sure the work was hard, but they got three square meals a day and it wasn't so bad once you learned to adjust and not upset the masters.

Their bent back grew calloused to the sting of the whip and after a while many hardly felt it. And yet, it was not right. Shiphrah and Puah deceived Pharaoh, Moses and Miriam hid in the rushes, even Pharaoh's daughter got in on the rebellion. Yet it seemed as though it was not enough. The people were still dying under slavery and all seemed lost.

Then there was Moses, minding his own business when a bush burst into flame. And later, death came to the slavers and the people of God were, after a fashion – freed. But the people of Israel didn't manage to stay free for long.

A few hundred years later, down from the North came the chariots, war horses, and iron spears of the Assyrians. Cities burned and pillaged. Whole tribes carted off into cruel exile. A few years later the Babylonians marched down and finished off what the Assyrians had left behind. Back into slavery all over again. Exile, slavery, death.

A fiery tongued prophet named Jeremiah, promised return to the downtrodden exiles. In a speech of inspiration and consolation, the prophet pointed the way to a great home-coming party, a great dance of the merry-makers to outdo anything you've ever seen. What gave him the courage to proclaim these words? Resurrection faith.

Many years later, there was this little place out in the far reaches of Galilee with Roman troops on every corner. All the Jews were being registered by the Romans - in order to better control them and oppress them and tax them.

The greatest, most powerful army the world had ever seen was sleeping in their back yard. What could anyone have done? Egyptians, Assyrians, Romans, its all the same. Adjust. Adapt. Keep your head down. Say your prayers. Don't draw attention to yourself. But...

Down in the back streets, in little room with a tiny window, a teenager, hugging her auntie began to sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour. . . for God has scattered the proud, and God has pulled down the mighty from their thrones."

The state knew everyone, and every act of rebellion was quickly staunched with force...so what would give little Mary the courage to sing these words? Resurrection faith.

Friday didn't take anybody by surprise. Not anybody who knew anything about the ways of death, anyway. If you knew the way the religious-political-economic establishment works, then you knew that Jesus was doomed from the start.

He disregarded too many social conventions, he associated with the wrong people. He invited too many dirty and smelly people into the sanctuary. He blessed the lowly and put down all the stuffy rich "religious" and political leaders. He went to too many parties with tax collectors and prostitutes and soon he had quite a following who were eager to hear his words of life...or to even just touch the hem of his cloak.

Jesus' crucifixion on Friday didn't come as any kind of surprise. Rome's peace was made by suppressing any form of rebellion or self actualization with brutal force and fear. The people Jesus blessed turned against him, betrayed him, denied him and the one who came inviting us all to life found himself dying.

The women said, "Let's go on down to the tomb and take along these flowers to show our last respects to Jesus." And so, the women went out and peered into the open tomb and got the surprise of their life.

The joyous shouts of these women have been heard before. In Shiphrah and Puah's resistance. In Miriam's song as the sea surged back over Pharaoh's chariots. In the tambourine dances of the homecoming exiles promised by Jeremiah. In the subversive lullaby of the pregnant Mary.

It is the song of resurrection.

When will we stop and take a look at what's really going on? Then we can see that God is with us – even in the midst of our doubt. Then we can see that even when life is the darkest dark, sooner or later we will know again that God doesn't leave us in death.

God Always Comes Back.

When will we get it into our heads that resurrection is and always has been GOD's WAY and that Easter Sunday is the ULTIMATE example of this message of love?

Look at the stories of Jesus' life. All the way through you can see God's power overshadowing death.

Every time the slaves are freed, the exiles return, the crippled stand and walk, or blind minds begin to see new ways and new faith, or prisoners of fear break free, or the hungry are fed and the children are blessed, and all – even the worst of the worst are welcomed again into community – God breaks those bounds of death and comes back!

By the time we get to Easter, how could the tomb be anything but empty?

This is what resurrection faith is all about. It doesn't have anything to do with dogma or doctrines or other trivial things – like who's wearing what and how long past twelve the service lasts. Resurrection faith is the faith and hope that hope and faith will return.

Resurrection faith is a radical trust in the God who keeps coming back when everything seems lost. A willingness, in the face of overwhelming odds, to entrust ourselves to the ways of life and love. To sing and dance and celebrate in the face of those who would stifle joy. To rejoice even in the face of our own doubts.

Life is bigger than our doubts. Bigger than any army or dictator or powerful government. Even if they kill the body, they have no power to stop the one who keeps coming back and resurrecting us to full life.

Easter Sunday is not an isolated event. It is unique, true, but we had glimpses of it over and over again as God repeatedly in the past and now in our present, responds to people faced with the power of death and leads them forward to freedom and fullness of life.

The resurrection is everywhere, and it thrives wherever the Spirit of God comes back in the hearts of downtrodden people.