

Risen Indeed!

This year churches across the globe will celebrate the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. Council of Nicaea met in the year 325 in what is now Turkey. This was the very first ecumenical council. Around 300 bishops from across the Roman Empire met from May to July to develop the creed. They were summoned there by Constantine, the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity. The Roman Army was faced with overwhelming odds while at war. Constantine had a vision of a cross in the clouds and took it to mean that the God of the Christians was directing him to victory. He adopted the slogan, "In this sign, we conquer." He declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, a major change for the Empire and the world. Previously the Christian Church was outlawed because they dared to say that Jesus was Lord. This was deemed to be anti-Roman and anti-Empire because they professed Caesar to be Lord among their many gods.

In the almost 300 years since the resurrection of Jesus and the growth of the early church, there was much chaos and disarray. There was no organized church. There were many different versions of the Christian faith. There was much disagreement and many claims as to what was of the truth about Jesus. There were many stories about Jesus, many more than those we find in the four Gospels we share. All those stories of Jesus claimed to be the truth.

So, Constantine called the Council of Nicea in order to develop one doctrinal statement of correct belief. In that way, true faith could be judged, heretics identified and banished, and orthodoxy established. The Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire and was the arbiter as to what true Christians were supposed to believe. Over time, controversies continued, churches split. That's why we have so many denominations today.

But the Nicene Creed was not the first creed. For the early church there was a simple statement of faith, a very simple one line and response. This creed was established when the Church was seen as a danger to the Empire. Upon seeing another believer, one would say, "Christ is risen!" Others then responded, "He is risen indeed!" That's all there was to it. The Resurrection of Jesus was the core of their faith. The Resurrection of Jesus was seen as the event that changed the world and their world view. Every time the words, "Christ is risen!" the others responded, "He is risen!!"

It's interesting that for the earliest Christians it wasn't the birth of Jesus, not his teachings, not the miracle stories that were the core of their faith. The key event of their faith and all of world history was the resurrection. The first Christian author, Paul, centers his own testimony on the fact that he had personally come face to face with the risen Jesus. He mentions Jesus' birth in passing, (he was born of a woman), and he quotes Jesus only twice, once to tell his followers to love one another and once with the words that we use at Holy Communion.

The first Gospel writer, Mark, also omits the story of Jesus' birth. He does include some of Jesus' and parables, many of his miracles, but half of his Gospel centers on Jesus' Passion and death. Mark doesn't have any stories of the appearance of the risen Jesus, there is only the proclamation of a young man in a white robe, sitting in the empty tomb giving the grieving women instructions. They had come to give Jesus a fitting burial. Instead they received instructions to relay to the disciples, who were hiding in fear, to go to Galilee and they will see the risen Jesus. No wonder those women were perplexed and terrified. Who would believe them? Certainly not the disciples who considered their words "an idle tale." The idea that Jesus had risen was beyond belief. They delivered the message to the disciples. Peter goes to the tomb and finds only empty linen cloths.

The women were probably not completely convinced of what they were saying. They took their amazement to the disciples. They were the first¹⁰ to proclaim the good news that Christ is risen..... They were the original apostles, but their words met with doubt. The disciples were "slow of heart." They thought that the women were just overcome with grief and victims of a wild imagination. Where Peter and the others were silent, the women courageously and simply preach the good news that "Christ is risen!....."

Those words became the essence of what it means to be Christian. It was the belief that "Christ is risen!.... The empty tomb was the only proof the women and the disciples had, but it was enough for them to believe that it was true that "Christ is risen!...."

How the resurrection happened is never detailed. Later accounts of encounters with the risen Jesus appearing to others can be found in later writings, some of which are in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, John and the book of Acts. Those appearance accounts are fascinating because of what doesn't happen. The risen Jesus doesn't come back with vengeance for the suffering he endured. Instead he speaks of hope for a new way life. There is no retribution, no appearing to Pilate, Herod, and other political leaders with the words "I'm back! Remember me?" (Probably the way I would have done it.) Jesus doesn't rise to confront his opponents with hate, but instead gives a sign of hope to his followers. The hope that God's love is stronger than sin, death, and any and all powers of evil which surround us.

The simple testimony, "Christ is risen!...." transformed those women and men. That testimony propelled them into a new way of living. They were called to the mission of loving and serving others with the same love that they had experienced in Jesus. The same love that transformed them from grieving women and frightened disciples into a new creation. Even Saul the persecutor of Christians was transformed into a powerful builder of churches across the known world.

Those same simple words, "Christ is risen!...." transforms us as well. They call us to a new hope, a new love. For those who despair that their guilt is too great for God to forgive — fear not! Easter means that God shows no partiality and has cleared all accounts, liberating humanity from shame and guilt. Those same simple words, "Christ is risen!...." reconcile us to God and each other as new creatures, forgiven and freed to love. For those trapped in the midst of pain and anguish — take heart! You are not alone! As we despair over a world filled with hate, violence, and blame — be encouraged! God has exposed humanity's violent ways. Easter means God wins! Easter means that God has taken one of the worst things in the world, the tortuous Roman cross and remade it into one of the best signs of hope for the world, the Tree of Life.

Easter Sunday is not best seen as the end of Lent. Rather it is the beginning of Eastertide. In a deeper sense, this day is just the beginning of new life, new opportunities to love and live. The fanfares and lilies signal not just the final victory, but also a launch, a kickoff, the dawn of a new day for the world. No longer are we slaves to despair, grief, fear, and evil. For "Christ is risen!...." He is risen indeed! Alleluia!