

THE EASTER QUESTION

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church of Newport, R.I on April 24, 2011. The liturgy is adapted from work by Christine Robinson

Have you ever wondered if God is real, and if so, how would we know it? Has God ever shown up in people's lives or by some miraculous doing left a signature some place? How big would an event have to be to constitute God's signature in human affairs?

These are the thoughts that drive some folks to their religious communities from time to time. Some ask God for a sign in prayer. Some climb mountains hoping to find God at the top. Some go to the sea hoping to find God there. Some plant gardens and others read or write poetry or study theology or scripture. Few are exempt from a lingering curiosity about what lies behind the veil of mystery separating what we can know from what we can't.

So, here's a question you didn't expected to be asked this morning. What if the world was to receive just such a sign, proof that God exists? What difference would it make in everyone's life if we were all given clear evidence that God exists?

What if an expedition that set out to locate the Biblical Noah's Ark found an actual ark with a passenger manifest listing the pairs of animals that rode on the ark? What if the Shroud of Turin had proven to be Jesus burial cloth rather than a clever medieval fake? What if a Bedouin shepherd from the Dead Sea area found yet another cave full of parchments that, when thoroughly dated and analyzed, offered eyewitness proof of the Resurrection?

More for the purposes of this sermon what if a new constellation of stars was to appear suddenly in the heavens? Where once there had been darkness now there are lights in a formation of stars that clearly spell out the words, "I AM GOD." And it was God speaking through the stars. In other words, what if we were to receive the signs for which we have been looking?

If that were to happen, I would venture to say that worship centers around the world would be filled to capacity for about a month. Television news teams would outdo each other with coverage, including interviews with distinguished religious leaders. Some prominent evangelist would take credit for having persuaded God to make an appearance, but secular scholars would debate whether or not God has violated the separation of church and universe. Of course Christopher Hitchens would claim the whole thing was an elaborate hoax perpetrated by the radical right.

A resolution would be filed in Congress thanking God for this message, but it would get bogged down over efforts by the gun lobby to attach a rider allowing the sale of anti-tank weapons to minors. Cults through out the world would gather together in preparation for the end of the world. And the T-shirt industry would have a field day creating products with messages to or about God.

But let us also imagine that a month passes with no further communication from God. Under those circumstances, the interest in the message would vanish almost as quickly as it appeared. Attendance in congregations would fall back to normal levels. The T-shirt industry would drop its “Welcome Back God” line and return to something more saleable. Press interest would shift to whatever Charlie Sheen or Lindsey Lohan has done recently. Gradually, the world returns to its trivial pursuits and rivalries and hatreds. The number of believers has not drastically increased and very little else has changed.

The Sign – the Proof – that we all thought we wanted came and went, but, as things turned out, it was not the “Sign” that most people were looking for. What we wanted was not “proof” of God’s existence but a feeling of God’s presence in our lives. We wanted God experiencing our confusions and anxieties and helping us to see – despite our blindness—some path toward living with a clearer sense of purpose and peace. We thought we wanted proof, but what we really wanted all along was a feeling that God cares.

Hymn There is more love somewhere

READER 1. We don’t really know much about Jesus because he lived a long, long time ago, before newspapers and books and TV. Everything we know about Jesus is from one collection of writings called the Bible. And even that was written down a long time after Jesus lived.

READER 2. The stories we have about Jesus tell us that he was born in very humble circumstances, that his parents were poor, that his father was a carpenter. We also are told there was a wonderful star in the sky the night Jesus was born, and that shepherds and kings came to visit the baby.

READER 3. We don’t know if those stories are true or not, but we do know that they help us imagine just how special Jesus was, and how the people around him loved him. And so we light a candle, and call it a Christmas candle, in honor of the birth of a great man.

Candlelighter 1: lights candle

Reader 4: We don’t know anything about Jesus growing up. We assume that he learned to be a carpenter because his father was a carpenter and in those days, little boys almost always grew up to do what their fathers did.

We do know that he learned a lot about his religion. He was Jewish. He went to Passover celebrations, learned the Jewish law, and learned what great Jewish teachers *had said. He learned this all by heart, because there were no books or pencils or schools as we know them today.*

READER 5: Maybe he even thought about growing up to be a rabbi, and learning even more about his religion. We just don't know. What happened as he was growing up is a mysterious part of Jesus' life.. So let's light another candle for Jesus, the man we will never entirely know.

Candlelighter 2

We thought we wanted proof but what we really wanted all along was a feeling that God cares. The same could be said for those who became Jesus followers. They thought they were looking for proof that the God to whom they had been faithful would lead them out of their captivity by the Romans. They were heavily taxed. The burden of paying these taxes made it all but impossible for any but the richest and most well connected to own anything. As a result of this economic system the vast majority of Jews were poor and getting poorer.

Their poverty eroded their sense of dignity, and it created tensions, which tore at the fabric of the Jewish community. While a few wealthy families lived comfortably off the labor of others, the vast majority was crushed economically and politically. They half longed for some proof that God cared about them and they half nourished a cynicism that, of course, God did not care.

READER 6 One day when Jesus was grown up, he went to hear a popular preacher named John the Baptist. John was telling people that the end of the world was near and that God was angry because so many things were wrong and so many people were selfish and mean. John believed that God would judge each person when they died as to whether they were good or bad. Some people liked what John had to say, but lots of people were afraid, for they realized they hadn't always been good.

READER 7 Jesus felt drawn to John and went to be baptized by him. Being baptized can be a wonderful experience and in that charged moment, Jesus realized that he felt so good, so free and happy that he suddenly knew that God's love was much more important than God's anger. He decided that it was his mission to go and tell people that they did not need to be afraid of God, that God loved them. So here's a third candle, a candle for Jesus to preach, teach and comfort people.

Candlelighter 3

Jesus felt very strongly about a lot of things. He believed that it is important to love God but just as important to love our neighbors; even the neighbors whose religion is different from ours or who are doing things we don't like. Jesus taught that we should share with our neighbors, that we should be peaceful and that we should not worry so much. He was concerned about people who were sick or handicapped and he liked people that nobody else liked. It became very clear to those around Jesus that he was an extraordinary man, and they loved him. So let us light another candle for Jesus the teacher whose words still inspire us today.

CANDLELIGHTER 4

What impressed Jesus followers most was that he reflected an extraordinary amount of self-possession. He understood who he was. And he seemed to understand them without needing introductions or explanations. He seemed to read their thoughts and feelings. He seemed to know what they needed. This intimate understanding was a quality they ascribed only to God. And they observed that his touch was healing; of wounds, of injuries and of feelings. .

Reader 9 And this was Jesus. He attracted a lot of attention and a lot of love. He helped people feel good and he helped them be good. Which is just as important.

Wherever he went in his small country people followed him around, crowds gathered, and people listened to what he had to say.

And though, in this world, there was every good reason to be afraid of what other people thought of you, he moved among them confidently – without fear. How could he do that? How can an individual live without some fear of very real threats to his life and well being?

He empowered people who had thought there was no good in them to believe, instead, that they were beautiful in God's sight. He was even thought to have healed some people of serious diseases. It was not so much what he said. Later his disciples would have some difficulty remembering precisely what he had said to them or what he meant by it. Rather, it was his manner of being among them that seemed to give his life and their lives a greater sense of purpose.

Some began to whisper among themselves, "Could it be true? Could this man be the Messiah? How else can we understand his complete lack of fear for his own well being?" They began looking for signs. They asked him to declare himself. He would not. They kept looking for wonders, for miracles, which would become part of the proof they needed. Later they would think that they had seen miracles, and the news of those miracles was spread far and wide so

that others would appreciate that perhaps the Messiah was at hand and be near when Jesus needed them.

It is difficult to imagine a more combustible situation than the beginning of Passover Week – the observance of the Jews' liberation from slavery – when this man entered Jerusalem while being proclaimed by some of his disciples as the next liberator of the Jews. To make matters worse, he went directly to the Temple of Jerusalem, which was virtually owned and operated by powerful people.

READER 10 After about a year of this some bad things started to happen. Jesus went to Jerusalem, the biggest city in his country. Many of the people, especially the poor people, welcomed him. The Bible says they threw down their cloaks to decorate the road and waved branches from trees, and cheered when he went by. It was a wonderful parade.

READER 11 But not everyone was happy to see Jesus come to Jerusalem. The officials of the city were afraid. They were afraid that Jesus would start a riot, or worse a revolution, and that they would be help responsible. People would be killed and perhaps officials would lose their jobs. People who are afraid often do bad things, and these officials decided that they would have to somehow get rid of Jesus. It is fear that extinguishes our candle. Fear which overcomes reason and justice.

Candle Extinguisher puts out one candle

READER 12 The next day Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem and what he saw there made him very angry. The priests there were cheating the people, charging them outrageous prices. Jesus got so angry when he saw this that he began to shout that they had turned the House of God into a Den of Thieves... and he ran round turning over the tables and making a big mess.

READER 13: This, in turn, made the priests very angry. They didn't like being called thieves. They didn't like a mess being made of their temple. The fact that in their hearts they knew it was true, made them even angrier. Now they wanted to get rid of Jesus too. It is anger which extinguishes our second candle.

CANDLE EXTINGUISHER 2

READER 14 The priests and officials got together and decided to do something about this troublemaker. So they bribed one of his friends, a man named Judas, to betray Jesus. We don't know much about Judas or why he did what he did. No doubt he had reasons, which seemed good to him. People always have reasons for what they do that seem good to them.

Nonetheless it is betrayal that extinguishes the third candle. The betrayal of friendship that was precious to both people.

Candle Extinguisher 3.

READER 15

The priests and officials took Jesus before the courts the next day and after a long and complicated discussion, Jesus was convicted and sentenced to death. It was an unfair trial. There wasn't any evidence or any jury, and Jesus wasn't guilty as charged but then sentenced him to death anyway. And so it is that injustice was the final cause of Jesus death. Injustice is a terrible thing.

Adult takes candle out into the foyer.

By the end of the week, the cross had claimed another victim. The crowds that had greeted Jesus' entry had gone away. They had been looking for proof of the miraculous, but it didn't happen. There was no earth shattering victory over death. So they went on to other things hoping to forget or at least get over their disappointments.

A handful of women – or maybe just one, the accounts weren't clear – came to the tomb where Jesus had been placed in order to be sure his body would be buried properly. And they discovered that his body was gone. The Gospel accounts make it clear that, at first, they assumed Jesus had been taken, possibly by grave robbers, and hidden somewhere else.

There are many different ways of looking at what happened next and what it meant. This is mine. The Gospel accounts eclipse subsequent events into a few days though it was probably months. The disciples' hopes were dashed. The proof they had been seeking – the signs of God's miraculous power over Rome – had not been there. Now even the body of their dear friend had been taken away and probably defiled. And they, themselves, were wanted men. They left Jerusalem attempting both to hide and get on about their lives.

Then, somehow, they felt they were being drawn back to Jerusalem. They could not get over the feeling that when they were together he was still with them. It was difficult to put into words, but to explain to a skeptical following what was in their hearts they told at least ten very different stories of actually seeing Jesus after his death. Most of these stories had one common quality. The disciples had not recognized Jesus at first. They had spent a good deal of time with him before they knew who he was.

They had been skeptics themselves. They had believed his existence in their lives was over. What they reported is that Jesus approached each disciple according to what that disciple most needed to hear, see or feel in order to be convinced. In other words, the reappearance of Jesus took place spiritually in their hearts, rather than physically as they had expected, and they felt it most importantly when they were together. Now, it was not physical proof they even cared about anymore, but the spiritual presence – they believed of God – in their lives.

ADULT BRINGS CANDLE BACK INTO THE CHURCH

READER 17 Some people believe that Jesus literally came back to life after he died. No one knows for sure. Many Unitarian Universalists believe that this is another way, like the star over Jesus birth and the shepherds of saying that this special man and his message still lives in our heart and still influences the way we live and think and make meaning in our world.

READER 18 We believe that Jesus lives in our hearts when we remember to help our neighbors.

CANDLELIGHTER 5 lights candle from one already lit.

READER 19 We believe that Jesus lives in our lives when we are inspired to live and if necessary die for what we believe is true.

CANDLELIGHTER 6 lights candle from one already lit.

READER 20 We believe Jesus lives in our hearts every time we try to love and understand people who are strange to us.

CANDLELIGHTER 7 lights candle from one already lit.

One story in Luke tells us that on that Sunday after Jesus' death, several women came to the tomb and found his body gone. They asked the two men who were standing there where the body had been taken. One man responded, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" This was the disciples' way of saying, "This is not about bodies. We don't know where the body is. We don't care. This is not about ghosts. This experience we have had is about a living presence in each of us.

Luke goes on to tell the story of two disciples who were walking away from Jerusalem and talking about the events of the last week. Along the way a stranger joined them. They spent a companionable day together and when evening came they sat down together for a meal. At the moment they broke bread they recognized that the stranger they were eating with was Jesus.

This story may have been their way of remembering that Jesus presence did not come to them as individuals. After his death, no disciple ever encounters Jesus alone, or even suggests this can be done. It is through their common meals that they realized something uncommonly supportive was working through their lives.

How do we know these stories are not just a reflection of the disciples' own anguish and despair – their hoping for a reassurance that never really came? The survival of the early Christian community against all odds, wrought as it was by men and women who had not been daring or imaginative before then, is a fact, which suggests that something very powerful happened to them.

What emboldened very ordinary men and women to become a community of Jesus disciples, in the midst of a political climate that was harsh and threatening to their very existence? It was not a ghost, but their sense of his presence – a presence they had never known before – giving them courage and a sense of hope. They thought it might be God's presence.

So, Easter is not about stones being rolled away from openings of caves. It is not about spectral evidence. It is not about empty coffins or mysterious shrouds. Easter is about the presence of reassurance in the lives of the disciples – and whatever reassurances have come into our own lives. It is about our conviction that our lives have meaning and that we will find a way somehow to serve that meaning even after some of our darkest moments.

Easter is the knowledge that those whom we love never entirely leave us and that we never leave them now or in any life to come. It is the recognition that despair never gets the final word. It is the recognition as well that what “helps and heals and holds us” the presence we seek, reaches out to us best when we are gathered together.

In some years, here in New England, we celebrate Easter when it is warm and sunny, and there is promise in the air, on the ground and in the trees of even more pleasant days to come. It is easy at such times to celebrate the birth of new life, the miracle of spring, the wonder of growth. However, in other years, it becomes clear at Easter that winter has not yet given up its grip on our region – as it seems sometimes not to want to give up its grip on our hearts.

Of course we yearn for warm days, and the earth giving forth all of its beautiful fragrances and colors. But, we could celebrate Easter in February if we took the occasion to remember and celebrate those times in our lives and in the lives of those we love when the tomb was opened not to eternal life necessarily but to a life reclaimed, to a life rededicated and a life renewed, a life rededicated to better things.