

“Can I Get a Witness?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
April 24, 2022 – Second Sunday of Easter
Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

Believe it or not! I remember well the husky voice of Jack Palance telling us these words at the conclusion of each segment of the 1980s TV series of the same name, during which he told some amazing tale about someone strange or bizarre or something seemingly impossible or unbelievable but that was all actually true.

The story of Christ’s resurrection would have been good material for the show as it is truly a story about amazing events that seem impossible. The writer of today’s gospel reading about post-resurrection appearances of Jesus could have easily concluded by stating, as Jack Palance did, believe it or not. But the writer of John hopes that what was written inspires us to believe and not not, for it is *in* believing in this amazing story that we find the blessings of life.

But believing and being blessed in so doing can be difficult. This is especially true for us in this scientific age as we embrace the philosophy of David Hume, who believed that something must be experienced repeatedly and uniformly for it to be true, leaving miraculous events, such as the resurrection, beyond the realm of what *could* be true, and as we hold to the teachings of Sir Isaac Newton, who taught that the world around is completely orderly and predictable, leaving no room, therefore, for the mysterious or supernatural.

But we do also live in a post-modern age, in which we hold the ideas of Hume and Newton to be true, but recognize that they are not the only truths in the universe. Theories of relativity tell us that so much of what we experience is not consistent for all people, but is shaped by our unique perspectives, that even something as seemingly consistent as time can be experienced and shaped differently by different people. For example, if I were to become fabulously wealthy and build a spaceship (as seems to be all the rage these days amongst the super-wealthy), and before going on journey through space, I set my watch to the same time as you here on Earth, but then zipped around the universe for a while at a high rate of speed, when I returned to the earth, our watches would show different times as we experienced time differently. We have also learned through quantum

mechanics that, especially when you look very, very closely at things, they don't always behave predictably as Newton taught us.

In this age, there can be room in our hearts and minds for both the predictable and the mysterious, the scientific and the miraculous, which is good news for us, as the mysterious, miraculous event of the resurrection, if we can believe in it, can bless us with life and give us hope for a better existence for all people.

But *can* we believe it? Can we trust the witnesses of the miracle of resurrection? Jesus' disciple Thomas, called the Twin, certainly didn't trust witnesses of the resurrection, and only believed in the unbelievable after experiencing himself, with his own senses, that Christ had risen indeed. Thomas could be our twin as it's hard for us, like Thomas, to trust the reports of others, especially in this post-truth age, where people say all sorts of ridiculous things in order to further their agendas. But there are reliable witnesses to resurrection life. You yourself can witness it and experience it and believe it.

Earlier this week, I met with a friend, who told me a story about a time when he was younger and was alone in a hospital room and feeling completely without hope for regaining health or a sense of life's goodness. He was at his lowest, when a Christian minister, who was at the hospital visiting parishioners, randomly came into his own room to visit with him, even though he was not a member of this minister's congregation. But the minister visited with him anyway, prayed with him, and left him a book of prayers. To my friend, that minister's kind and considerate act of sharing prayers made all the difference. The words offered were truly life-giving and life-changing, giving my friend hope for experiencing something new and good in life. And my friend, having recovered and grown through the experience, was inspired to use his life to help others.

I know that my friend is not alone in experiencing resurrection life through the words or work of another caring person. You can probably think of your own experiences and remember times when your life was restored or renewed by someone breathing words of life upon you, just as Jesus breathed resurrection life upon his own disciples, or when someone acting in ways that helped you experience life's goodness, perhaps, like my friend, when you were at your lowest.

We are all, like my friend, witnesses to God working miracles of life within us through the gifts of others. And perhaps you've witnessed God working such miracles *through* your own words or work. Perhaps you've given up some destructive habit or added some discipline that brought you and those around you new life. Maybe through your own giving of time, talent, or treasure, you've seen God growing miracles of life in the world.

This Easter season, let us all work and pray for more miracles of resurrection life to come to the world. We pray, especially for the people of Ukraine, on this very day that many of them celebrated Easter, that even in the midst of experiencing the horrors of war, they would also witness God working to preserve, sustain, and restore them to life. We pray that God would be softening the hearts of those bent on sowing and destruction, seeking to conquer their neighbors, that they would recognize the evil of their ways and turn or be turned from them. We pray for the one who is the risen Alpha and Omega, to grow his realm of love on earth, to rule with justice over the world's rulers, and to destroy once and for all the world's ways of destruction.

Friends, let us believe and take hope in the truth that God is at work in the world and God is at work in us and through us. Pay attention to God's miraculous work. Be a witness to God's amazing but true resurrection life. And join Thomas in responding to what you experience by faithfully exclaiming to Christ, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). Amen.