

What Do You Pretend to Believe?
Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022, 9:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

What do you pretend to believe?

I mean, we all do it, right?

We all pretend to believe things.

There's those things that it seems that everyone else believes, and it's just easier to go along.

Things that we have always been told are true but maybe now we're thinking "yeah ... I'm not so sure about that" ... but not sure enough to say anything.

Things that we're pretty sure we don't believe in ... but if we said what we really believed or even that we're not sure what we believe ... we are afraid we'd be called ignorant ...or unfaithful ...or maybe even crazy

It's completely human. There's this guy, Steven Sloman, who's a professor of cognitive science at Brown and he's studied this, and he says:

"Everyone has a compulsion to be right, meaning that they want the people around them to think they're right, and this is easily achieved by mouthing the things that the people around you say....

"Think about if you were to utter a fact that contradicted the opinions of the majority of those in your social group. You pay a price for that... That's how social pressure influences (what we say we believe), and it often does it in imperceptible ways."

For example, Chase has probably learned to say, "Go Dodgers!" so enthusiastically that the unknowing person would think he actually means it.

Now, sometimes it's harmless enough.

We say "yeah that movie was great" when our friends are raving about it, when really what we are thinking is:

"Man, there's two hours of my life I'm never getting back."

Or maybe we pretend to believe "you really look good in that color."

Some are more harmful.

Maybe we pretend to believe that recycling will reduce global warming and save the planet.

Maybe we pretend to believe that capitalism is the only workable economic system.

Maybe we pretend to believe that the abuse will stop if we just give the relationship a little more time.

And in the church ... oh, here in the church there are so *many* things to pretend to believe. We have quite the brunch menu to choose from.

Because we have done such a good job as the church of demanding belief. Of telling people that if you don't believe the right things, not only can you not be in our club, if you don't believe the right things you are going to hell.

And it's not just *that* that can keep us pretending.

These are sacred things, these beliefs. These are beliefs that people have built their lives around. Beliefs that give people hope and sustenance in terrible times. We don't want to just pull the Jenga brick out on that and have it all come tumbling down.

So, sometimes we keep it to ourselves. And we pretend. We go along.

And maybe we also adopt kind of a "fake it 'till you make it" attitude. That we must be missing something and if we just go along, someday we will get it. Someday we will see what everyone else seems to see. Someday it will all make sense, and we won't have to pretend anymore, it will be real.

Now, I bring this up because I don't know if you've noticed this morning but it's Easter. The feast of the resurrection. And if there is one thing that Christians are hard core about believing in, it is the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is perhaps *the* core doctrine of the church. That Jesus died and on the third day rose again not just a spirit but in his physical body ... and we look forward to the resurrection of all the dead and the life of the world to come.

Belief in the resurrection as historic fact – something that actually, physically happened to Jesus – has practically been the hand stamp admission needed to get into and stay in the Christian Church.

And just going through this service, it probably feels like that's true. This morning, we have gathered and sung glorious songs proclaiming the day of resurrection ... told the story of the women coming to the empty tomb ... and I know I am expected – well, maybe not as much here at All Saints, but still on some level expected to stand here in this pulpit and preach a sermon

about the resurrection with all the conviction of a true believer that nearly 2,000 years ago this absolutely actually happened.

It's kind of the preacher's gig this morning.

Except I can't do that. Because the truth is when it comes to the resurrection ... whether it actually physically happened ... here's my truth.

I.

Don't.

Know.

I don't know!

And I want to talk about it for a few minutes because I wonder if there might be a few others of you out there feeling the same way ... and also because I believe our Gospel reading this morning tells us not only is it OK not to know ...
... not only is it OK to question
... not only is it OK even to deny the resurrection really happened ... that, actually, certainty is the very opposite of what Easter morning is about.

So, here's my story ... and I'll keep it short. (Yeah ... I heard you laugh)

When I was younger, I absolutely believed in the resurrection for the same reason I believed in everything else ... because I had faith.

Because older people told me to.

Because I had a community at church that supported each other in that belief.

Because I had been told that people for 2,000 years had believed it was true, which was like, way longer than we believed in gravity and the earth being round so I seemed on pretty solid ground.

I had faith. I didn't even have to try. I just naturally believed. And that wasn't and isn't a bad thing. That is a wonderful thing. And if that is where you are ... that's beautiful. And I may end up there with you again before it's all said and done.

And ... I'm not there right now.,

As I got older, for me, that stopped working for me. And yet, by that time I was already in seminary, and I knew I wanted to be a priest ... and they won't exactly let you do that if you're coming out against core church doctrine. So, I found a way to make it fit. I made what seemed like a reasonable peace with the resurrection.

I decided that I could believe the resurrection physically happened to Jesus because I figured there had to be something.

Here was my thinking:

There were countless itinerant preachers in Jesus' time. The odds of a failed preacher ... and we have to say that's what Jesus was when he died ... just one more failed preacher killed by the state. The odds of an executed failed preacher sparking a movement that would literally sweep around the world are astronomical. There had to be something ... some unique catalytic event that sparked this movement.

So I could absolutely believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus ... certainly still because I had a community expecting me to and supporting me in this belief ... and because I found a way to fit it into my own rational framework.

And now more years have gone by. And that certainty, that "had to be" .. has fallen away with the resurrection for me as it has with many other things.

Where I am with the resurrection right now is that I have absolutely no idea whether it actually physically, historically happened.

I don't know if Jesus physically appeared to his disciples ... or maybe those were just stories told by his followers to buttress their deep experience of Jesus as the closest thing to God they had ever experienced.

I don't know if the tomb was really empty on Sunday morning ... maybe it was only empty because someone had removed the body so stories like this could be told – that's what the Romans were afraid of. Or maybe it was even just a story they started to tell.

I don't know whether the resurrection actually happened the way we celebrate it today.

And furthermore, I have to say it doesn't matter to me whether it did or not.

Because what I believe ... and actually the word trust fits better than believe ... what I trust in more strongly than ever, is not resurrection as history. That doesn't interest me at all.

What I trust in, what changes my life. What fills me with hope and wonder is resurrection as deep, beautiful, poetic truth.

The longer I live, the more I have to trust that we are more than just spirits housed in some flesh shell ... but that we are embodied in beautiful and sacred ways ... and that claiming an embodied resurrection is a way of honoring that our bodies are good, that our bodies are holy, that our bodies are a delight to God.

The longer I live, the more I have to trust that death is not the end for the bodies we leave for dead and hide away. Bodies that have been killed quickly by police and soldiers' guns and killed slowly with poverty of care and resources. That those bodies will have new life and that the injustice that was done to them will not be the final word.

And yes, I still trust that something did happen after Jesus died ... something so powerful that they at least chose to express it in terms of a bodily resurrection because that was the only language that could convey how powerful that experience was, how it changed them, how it confirmed the truth of everything this revolutionary Jesus had done and said about love being more powerful than the worst that Empire could throw at it.

When I think about resurrection, really what I have come to trust is best phrased by our sister, Becca Stevens, "I trust that everything but love dies ... and I'm OK with that."

For me, I don't need to believe that the resurrection actually happened the way we celebrate it today.

Because I have seen resurrection. Physical, bodily resurrection. I have seen its power. I have felt it. And I believe in it.

I have seen bodies that were bruised and broken and abandoned as trash come to life because of the power of love.

I have seen hope come out of the deepest of grief and felt the presence of ancestors who have long since left this earth like they were holding my very hand. .

I have met Thistle Farners, seen a rose grow from a crack in the concrete, and heard women left for dead cry "Still I Rise."

And I have seen it happen in communities like this where what is at the center is not orthodoxy – do you believe the exact right things – but are you willing to love and be loved the best you can ... often in ways that challenge some of those other things that we have learned to pretend to believe in that really might not be true.

And part of why I'm OK with that. Part of why I can stand here and tell you that I'm not going to pretend I absolutely believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection ... and that if you have been pretending, you don't need to either, is that we have really good company.

And all we have to do is look at the Gospel we just read. Because there are three types of people in this story.

First, there's the women who saw the empty tomb. Now let's look at what happened to them. They didn't just see an empty tomb say "Alleluia, he is risen!" They had a little help connecting

some dots. Help as in two fairly terrifying figures in dazzling garments who chastised them and reminded them of Jesus' words that he would rise. Well, OK, given that, they believed that Jesus had risen, and they ran to tell the others.

Next, there were the others, who heard the story and didn't believe it. They thought it was absolutely nonsense.

And finally, there was Peter. Peter got up and ran to the tomb. He stooped down, and only saw the wrappings. And then the Gospel said, "so he went away, full of amazement at what had occurred."

The believers. The unbelievers. And the one who saw something, didn't necessarily believe or understand what it was, but was amazed by the possibility.

The first thing to note is that NONE of these people got cast out of the community. All of them had a role ... all of them had a place at the table.

The second is that each of these had a unique and valuable and valid experience.

The women had a powerful even supernatural conversion experience – those things really happen – and they interpreted it in a way that became their reality and a foundation for their continuing faith. That's wonderful. That's a gift.

The others and the apostles didn't have that experience so they couldn't believe what the women believed. But they still stayed in the community and tried to follow the way of love Jesus had taught them.

And then there was Peter. Peter, the rock on which Jesus was to build the church. Peter is the one I love this Easter morning. Because Peter ran into the tomb. And Peter didn't get to see two supernatural figures, didn't have anyone remind him of anything. Peter ran into the tomb and he didn't see anything. He saw some cloths tossed aside on the ground. Peter didn't see anything but blank space ... and yet he allowed himself to be amazed by the possibility of what that might mean.

The first account of the resurrection comes in Mark's Gospel and the original ending has the women not believing and proclaiming but fleeing from the tomb "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That was the way the Gospel of Mark usually ended.

It was only later that they screened it in some post production focus groups and the studio made them add resurrection appearances and the ascension ... which then got added into the other Gospel accounts.

Theological certainty was never an expectation of Easter.

The dream of Easter is not knowing absolutely what happened, but trusting that amazing things can happen. Being able to see something ... or maybe being able to see nothing at all ... and allow for the amazing possibility that that might be God at work. To allow for the amazing possibility that love might be present in new and powerful ways. To allow for the possibility that the way things are isn't the way they have to be. To allow ourselves to be gripped by the power not of certainty but of wonder.

Cole Arthur Riley, the brilliant poet behind BlackLiturgies on Instagram, writes in her new book, [This Here Flesh](#),

Wonder ... is a force of liberation. It makes sense of what our souls inherently know we were meant for. Every mundane glimpse is salve on a wound, instructions for how to set the bone right again. If you really want to get free, find God on the subway. Find God in the soap bubble. Me? I meet God in the taste of my grandma's chicken. I hear God in the raspy leather of Nina Simone's voice. I see the face of God in the bony teenager bagging my groceries. And why shouldn't I? My faith is held together by wonder—by every defiant commitment to presence and paying attention. I cannot tell you with precision what makes the sun set, but I can tell you how those colors, blurred together, calm my head and change my breath. I will die knowing I lived a faith that changed my breathing. A faith that made me believe I could see air.

That is who we are. That is who I long for us to be as the church. Not a church whose faith depends on everybody saying the same exactly right thing. But faith that is held together by wonder and grace. By looking at nothing and trusting that God is there.

The message of Easter is that we do not need to pretend to believe anything.

Easter invites us to peer into the nothingness and imagine what it might mean.

To see the tomb not as an answer provided but as a womb ready to give birth to new and utterly unpredictable life.

To imagine worlds that are beyond our comprehension and a love powerful enough to bring them into being.

You do not have to pretend to believe anything. You can own your truth ... whatever it is right now ... knowing that it can and probably will change. For our faith is not held together by certitude but by wonder. By every defiant commitment to presence and paying attention. Not a faith that can tell you with precision exactly what the resurrection is and how it happened ... but how the reality of resurrection experienced, seen and felt in our lives calms our heads and changes our breath.

And if we can help each other do that, if we can help each other stop pretending.

If we can let go of certainty and hold lightly of the liberating force of wonder, then we will have a resurrection faith.

A faith that literally takes our breath away.

A faith that will never make us feel we have to pretend again. Amen.