

## HALFWAY BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Is the cup half empty, or half full? Truly a weird question. If the cup is half empty, it is also half full. If it is half full, it is also half empty. Why do we try to blind ourselves to half of reality? If Easter is true, God is with us more than we ever knew before. If Easter is false, God may be with us, but we do not know it or trust it – not yet, and not very much.

By now, most of us know that we are halfway between life and death. The cup is half empty: We live in a temporal, broken world with pain and suffering all around us, where everything runs down and everything dies. The cup is half full: God is with us, and Jesus is risen. We are heading for fullness of life and love in realms beyond our best imaginings. Are we dying, or are we coming to Life? Yes! The answer is YES!

There is a whole lot more to Christianity than just thinking, of course. Some feelings and emotions can be pretty shallow as well. But there are many dimensions and many layers to religion – loyalty, gratitude, commitment, devotion – and if authentic, it is personal and comes in part at least from personal encounter. But I already stray from why most of you are here.

Easter is supposed to be a celebration of what we already trust – not a tirade or an attempt to convince people about what they *should* believe, whether they really believe it or not. But some of us preacher-types feel compassion for those who have never experienced a breakthrough with Easter realities. It is hard to celebrate what seems far-fetched, or even false. Can I help? Probably not. I certainly cannot hand you any faith or belief that you have not come to on your own. But sometimes a better map of the terrain can still be helpful, even if we all have to explore the terrain for ourselves. So I want to offer some guidelines, knowing they will not be helpful to everyone.

To be fair, you should know that I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. Over the years I have doubted it in every way I could, but in this case, the doubts are what shrivel up and blow away. It has been many years now since I was “fair-minded” or unprejudiced about the Resurrection. That surprises some people who know me, because I am fairly straightforward about some other biblical blunders.

I know, for instance, that the Virgin Birth is hoey, because the Bible tells me so. That is, the Bible itself is so full of inconsistencies and contradictions around the Virgin Birth stories that no fair-minded, unfrightened person could claim it as historical fact. Traditional views about the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment are also in error. The timing is off by at least two thousand years, and much of the message those views carry is a reversal of what Jesus believed and taught us about the grace and forgiveness of God. Beyond that, Jesus makes it clear that He does not know about the dates or the details of the end times, even though lots of His followers are certain that *they* do.

You do not need preachers to tell you that the end is coming. Any scientist can tell you that. Fortunately or unfortunately, we are all coming to the end of our own earthly lives long before the sun fails, the asteroids come, or we destroy each other or our food supplies. Humans have always been fascinated by disasters. There is no clear and certain protection from all of them – not in this world. Long before Judaism came into our world, we were telling stories of a great flood that wiped out all but one family from the earth. I myself have lived through the Great Depression and several lesser ones, through two World Wars and many lesser ones, through plagues and earthquakes and the slaughter of millions. You do not have to convince me that the world is a dangerous, unfair, imperfect place. And you cannot convince me that whether or not I like the current President, it means I no longer have to be a responsible or loyal citizen of this country. *Of course* the sky is falling in. It always has been. So what else is new? We cannot fix or control everything. Some things we *can* help, and that is wonderful. But whatever happens, we can get caught being faithful to our Lord.

\* \* \*

There are discrepancies in the reports about the Resurrection too. They reflect different perspectives from different witnesses. But that's a different matter. They do not discredit each other or make it clear that the stories are contrived (like the Virgin Birth narratives do). Besides, I believe in the Resurrection for reasons way beyond all such details. We will get to that, but first some guidelines.

FIRST: Jesus is not a secondhand Savior. NEVER SETTLE FOR BEING A SECONDHAND BELIEVER. Pretending does not help when it comes to faith. Sometimes trying to believe what others believe can help while the sun shines. But when the storms come, houses built on sand fall with a great crash – as Jesus warned us.

When it comes to things as big as the Resurrection, all of us – every last one of us – are “Doubting Thomas” to begin with. The women who have just come from the empty tomb tell the men that they have seen Jesus. The men are maybe polite, but they do not believe them. The apostles then *encounter* Jesus themselves, and they believe. But when they later tell Thomas, who had been absent, he cannot believe what they tell him. Real faith is more than hearsay. Even though Thomas knows and trusts these ten friends he has walked with and been with through the earthly ministry of Jesus, *real* belief does not work that way. Thomas believes after he has his own encounter with the Risen Lord. Do not be shy or apologetic to discover that it is this way for you too.

SECOND: NOBODY IS AN AUTHENTIC BELIEVER BY READING A BOOK. I do not care *what* the book is. Peter, Paul, the rest of the first apostles – in fact, two generations of early Christians – had no New Testament. The books come after the encounters. Pentecost and personal visitations make Easter real for real people. Hold out for your own personal encounter. That may seem scary at first. What if the Holy Spirit never comes for you? Well, you check to see if you are blocking – if you are being more rebellious or angry than necessary. I always am, at first. But the Holy Spirit has been coming for us – for all of us who are willing and open to the encounter – for many centuries now.

Christianity is not a “dead religion.” It did not happen long ago and then shut down for the last two thousand years. Maybe because I am a Pastor, people tell me their stories more openly than they do with others. A huge privilege. Nevertheless, I hear about the encounters frequently. They come in prayer; they come in visions; they come in experiences that seem more real than reality itself. When was the last time I heard that Jesus had appeared to one of my friends? Four days ago, in fact. It was a God-touch. Not even a “call” to a true vocation. The person was trying to be faithful and needed some reassurance, and suddenly “there He was.” Some would call that weird. But if Jesus is alive and with us, it would be far *more* weird if such things did not keep happening. You think Jesus would shut off all the caring and comfort and forgiveness and grace two thousand years ago?  
*“O ye of little faith!”*

By the way, the books alert us to what is possible – to what might happen. And the stories of friends we trust can also help us to be more open to the possibilities. But these can never be substitutes for

our own relationship with Jesus. We all have to walk some kind of a Damascus Road or our religion is only hearsay – only a secondhand attempt to “put a good face on it.” And you can tell which is which by the level of devotion, gratitude, and commitment that springs forth from it.

THIRD: The third guideline (and I will only mention three) may seem complex and theoretical to some of you at first. But it will be exceedingly helpful to many others. NEVER LOOK FOR PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION. LOOK FOR EVIDENCE.

This is not a cop-out. Nothing in the world that is true can ever be proved. Proof belongs to a different category of life. We can prove facts, but we can never prove truth. And a million facts never add up to a single truth. That’s because facts belong to the *objective* side of life. Truth is in a different category. Truth is always on the *subjective* side of life. As subjective beings, we put value and meaning onto some things. If we do not, all of life is dry and meaningless to us.

All through human history, some people have bewailed the fact that they cannot prove the existence of God. But they are looking in the wrong category of life. God is beyond all the facts. We can never prove spiritual truth by appealing to physical facts. We find God in the realms of truth, or no relationship with God is possible. To reduce God to the realm of facts automatically makes God meaningless – too small to worship.

“Ah, so then God is not really real.” That is the usual first response of the neophyte. “If it is not a fact, it is not real.” Actually, if it is only a fact, it has no *meaning*. If it is only a fact, then it is objective, dry, outside of us. Facts are useful. They can remind us not to walk over a cliff or not to stand in the middle of a freeway. They are useful far beyond that, of course, but facts do not know what we care about, and they cannot help us to know what we are living for. They have information, but no meaning – no truth. Reciting the multiplication tables to someone who is suicidal does not help. Neither does citing the statistics on how many others have committed suicide in the last six months. Proof is a good thing for dealing with facts, but proof is too small a thing when it comes to truth. *Evidence* is what we need when we seek truth. And in the long run, evidence is more powerful than proof.

No human can live for facts and have any meaning in their lives. To be truly human, we take risks. We claim that some things matter to us. But this is always a subjective choice – it is a value *we* put into the picture. That means we might be wrong. That means not everyone will agree with us. We live for what we call truth; never do we live for the facts. Love, for instance, is a truth – never a fact. There is huge evidence that love exists in our world. But you can never prove it to anybody who wants to doubt it. And many of you have discovered that, to your sorrow.

I can prove, in the low-level realities of this world, that I am married to a woman named Mariana. That is a fact. And I can show you that her name appears on her birth certificate. I can even prove that we have been married for almost sixty-one years. I can subtract the date on our marriage license from today's date, and there it is. But that will tell you nothing about what it has been like, what has happened between us through all those years, what it means to me. And I can *tell you* that I love her. But that is not a fact, and I cannot prove it to any objective person who wants to doubt it. If you care, you have to look for the evidence – not the facts.

Many men, and more women than you might think, have a hard time committing to a relationship. They want proof that it is right, that it will work, that it is a safe choice to make. But if they are waiting for proof, they will never *experience* the relationship. Some people think they can try it out for a while and thus gather enough information to know if it is the right choice. Yet there is a categorical difference between a marriage of total commitment (for better, for worse, until death do us part) and the flimsy pretend version of “Well, let's try it out and see how it goes.” On that kind of basis, Mariana and I would have been divorced at least three dozen times. I am reminded of another older couple being interviewed at their sixty-fifth anniversary. Somebody asked the husband if he had ever considered divorce. “No,” he replied. “Murder, yes – divorce, never.”

Truth is always a gamble. The evidence mounts, but eventually we have to jump – claim it, go for it – or we lose it. Trusting God is never an objective fact. It is a subjective relationship. There is no way to prove that it will ever make sense or work out in the way we wish it would. Knowing that saves a lot of foolishness and a lot of wasted effort.

The Resurrection of Jesus is never a fact. It can always be doubted. But the evidence is all around us, and growing all the time. Sooner or later we have to jump – claim it, decide to trust it – or we lose it.

WE BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION BECAUSE OF THE EVIDENCE – NEVER BECAUSE OF ANY PROOF.

What is the evidence for the Resurrection? Peter is evidence; not proof, but serious evidence. What happens to transform his life so dramatically? From the tentative, frightened, confused fisherman who hears that Rooster's Cry – to the "Quo Vadis" that sends him back into Rome to be crucified upside down. It proves nothing, but the evidence is huge indeed. Something transforms Peter – something way beyond facts and proof. We can ignore the evidence if we want to, but that does not make us brilliant or more intelligent than those around us. It only means that we are choosing to ignore the evidence.

And Paul, who starts out arresting and condemning Christians to death. What happens to him on the Damascus Road? It proves nothing. But something changes Paul so dramatically that we can hardly fathom it, even if we are willing to go with the evidence. Nor does it last for only a few days or a few weeks. For the rest of his life, Paul is an amazing illustration of a man so focused on being obedient to the Holy Spirit of the Risen Jesus that it is impossible to explain or comprehend his life apart from his encounter with the Risen Christ. Trying to prove the Resurrection is a fool's errand indeed – the wrong category. But the evidence is overwhelming.

Of course, it does not stop with Peter and Paul. The great cloud of witnesses has been growing larger all through the generations that have followed. And not just the great and famous names. Who built this church – and why? And why did some decrepit old man come back to be your Pastor, when some of you were starting to forget what was really important?

By the way, there is plenty of evidence that Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was an amazing spiritual and religious leader. There is plenty of evidence that Muhammad, the Prophet, was an amazing spiritual and religious leader. I am neither a Buddhist nor a Muhammadan, but that does not mean I cannot respect or honor what the evidence makes clear and real.

Nevertheless, Jesus was the Christ of God who rose from the dead to be present with us: all of us who want Him to be – who are willing to let Him be. And I would never try to *prove* that. I do not want it to ever get that small. Yet the evidence is overwhelming – generation after generation, through all the mayhem, despite all the stupidity of our broken world. He is risen indeed! And He lights our lives in the here and now, until we trust Him more and more to light our lives through all the realms to come.

So back to and on with our celebrations. Hallelujah! He lives! He lives! Happy Easter – forever!