

Just the Facts, Ma'am

I had an interesting phone call this week. One of my fellow Rotarians called to ask me why we celebrate Easter on a different date each year. I started to explain the business about Easter coming on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. He said, "Yeah, I know about that. I was just wondering if we know the actual date of Christ's resurrection and, if we do, why don't we celebrate Easter on that day?"

No one had ever asked me the question exactly that way. Do we know the exact date of the day that Christ was resurrected? The answer is, No.

We don't even know the exact year of the Resurrection. We think it happened around 30 A.D. give or take a few years.

In fact, we don't know many of the details of Jesus' life. If you have a Dragnet faith, you're in trouble. You remember Dragnet, the old television police show in which the detective is constantly saying, "Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts." A Dragnet approach to faith doesn't work, because we don't have many facts.

At one time the church thought it knew the year of Christ's birth. This is the year A.D. (Anno Domini—the Year of Our Lord) 2008 because it's supposed to be 2,008 years since Christ's birth. About 1,500 years the church went to work to determine how many years it had been since Christ's birth and decided it had been 525 years. So, that became the year 525 A.D. It wasn't long before the scholars figured out that they were probably off a few years, maybe as much as 18 years. But we have been counting the years since that time ever since. This is the 2008th year since the year the church mistakenly thought Jesus was born.

We think Jesus was baptized when he was thirty. But that's just a guess. That's when the Jewish law says that a man is an adult. So, we are guessing that Jesus waited until he was considered legally an adult to begin his ministry. But, as I say, that's just a guess.

Matthew, Mark and Luke give us the impression Jesus' ministry lasted a year, from the time of his baptism to his crucifixion and resurrection. John tells us his ministry lasted three years.

The point being that if your approach to faith is based on knowing the facts, you will have some serious problems, because we just don't have that many facts.

Is there an alternative? Yes, there is. Jesus presents it to the disciples who encountered him on the road to Emmaus.

These two disciples were there when the women came back from the tomb in which Jesus was laid and reported the tomb was empty and that angels had appeared to them and told them that Jesus had been resurrected.

The two disciples didn't know what to make of this. They had been talking for several hours as they walked along, trying to figure out what was going on. I'm sure they discussed the possibility that maybe Jesus hadn't actually died on the cross, but simply fainted. But then the Roman soldiers had done many crucifixions and would know the difference. Besides, they had stabbed him in the side with a spear, to make certain he

was dead. Maybe some of the other disciples had taken his body. But why would they have done that? And weren't there Roman soldiers guarding the tomb. Maybe the Roman soldiers took his body. Again, why?

Maybe he was really resurrected. But dead people didn't come back to life, did they? Of course, there was Lazarus. Jesus brought him back to life. But who would have brought Jesus back to life?

On and on their conversation went. The more they talked, the more confused they became. All they had were questions. There were no facts.

Then Jesus joined them and asked what they were talking about. They explained that they were trying to figure out what had happened to Jesus. He was right there beside them, but they didn't recognize him.

Jesus began using the scriptures to explain to them why the Messiah had to suffer and die. As he talked, they felt their grief and confusion being replaced by joy and certainty. They knew deep in their hearts that what this stranger was telling them was the truth.

When they got to Emmaus, they begged him to eat a meal with them. They wanted to hear more of what he was saying. When he blessed the bread and broke it to share with them, suddenly they realized who he was. When they recognized him, he simply disappeared.

You know, they never get their questions answered about what happened on Easter Sunday morning. But those questions no longer mattered. What mattered was the Resurrected Christ had come to them. They walked with him. They talked with him. They shared a meal with him.

We are sometimes like those disciples. Things happen that we don't understand. We lose someone or something important to us. We are grieving and confused. We don't know what to think.

After the excitement and joy of Easter, we find our critical minds going to work and asking, "Wait a minute. What really happened that morning? Tell me that exact day and hour this happened. And explain to me in a way that makes sense what happened on that Easter Sunday morning."

We ask, "If Jesus is really alive, where is he?"

The answer, of course, is that he is right here with us. Just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus is walking right beside us as we make our journey through life. And just like them, we often don't recognize him.

The harder we work at trying to figure out the truth, the more confused and frustrated we get.

Then there are those moments when we stop thinking and questioning, and we just quietly listen.

Communion is one of those times. It's no accident that Jesus revealed himself to the disciples as he broke the bread. This sacred meal is one of those places where the barrier between the spiritual world and our world becomes very thin. As we kneel at the altar and receive the communion elements, we often experience the very real presence of the Resurrected Christ.

We still have a lot of questions. When did it happen? How did it happen? However, we no longer question whether it happened. We know Christ was resurrected, because we recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

Our eyes are opened and we realize he has been walking with us all along.

We realize that it was Jesus who has set our hearts on fire on many occasions, as he teaches us the truth. The truth is more than just facts. It is deeper, stronger and more important than mere facts. The truth is more real than facts. The truth is that Christ is the Son of God, that he has been resurrected to eternal life and that he is with us. The truth gives us victory over confusion and frustration and lifted us out of grief and despair.

The resurrected Christ is with us. That's all that really matters. We still have questions, many questions. But our faith is not dependent upon finding the answers to those questions. Our faith is built on our experience of the presence of Christ.

So, we turn to the means of grace, those activities in which we experience the presence of Christ, for spiritual renewal, to get our hearts set on fire again.

And Communion is one of the most powerful of the means of grace. As we receive the broken bread and the bled juice, we find ourselves in the presence of Christ once again. Our hearts are set on fire. The confusion and despair, which have crept into our souls, are cast out.

We can return from Emmaus to Jerusalem to tell the world that Christ is alive. We know. We shared a meal with him.

Dr. Wesley Welborn
Senior Pastor