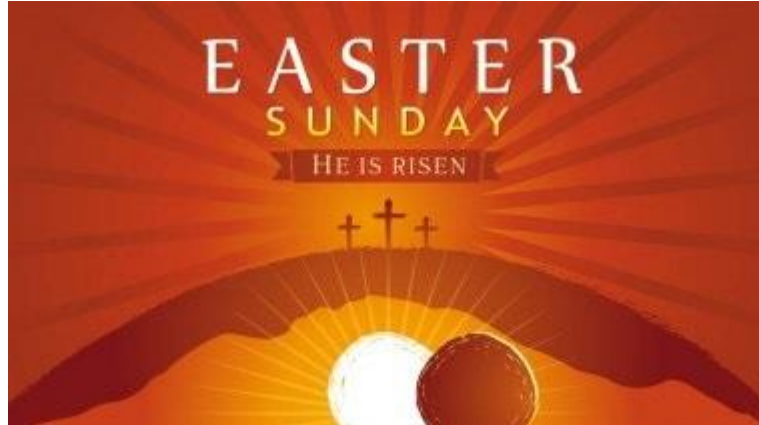


Easter Sermon 2022



Luke 23:1 "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body . . . and returning from the tomb, (the women) told all this to the eleven (apostles) and to all the rest . . . But (their) words seemed to (the apostles to be) an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

His name is James Tucker, and he is a board-certified psychiatrist and a professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia Medical School. He is also the Director of the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia Medical School, where for the last 50 years, scientists have investigated claims by small children, who seem to be remembering previous lives. The school has researched over 4,000

such cases, where young children, usually about the age of only four or five, begin making statements that suggest a former life. They will cry, for example, that they miss their 'old' home, or their 'other' mother or father, or they will have repeated nightmares of an event from some other time. Usually by the time the children are ten years of age, they have forgotten all about these memories.

The scientists at the university approach these stories with a skeptical attitude, as many of us would do, but with an open mind. They discount any information that the children, or more likely their parents or family, could have gleaned from the internet or from others. They test the memories with photographs of past family and friends and strangers, and with actual visits to past locations. And in many cases, they simply cannot assemble enough information from these young children to make a positive identification of the remembered person, and even when they do, they cannot always verify the details remembered. Still in a remarkable 30% of the cases, the remembered past life is identified, tested, and the memories found credible.

Like James Leininger from Lafayette, Louisiana, who at two years old was having trouble with a recurring nightmare where he was under water drowning. By the age of three, different details had begun to slowly emerge, James had told his parents that before he was born he was a pilot, who flew from a boat, that

his plane got shot in the engine by the 'Japs', that his plane caught on fire and crashed into the sea. When later shown a map and asked where, he pointed to the island of Iwo Jima. When asked what his name was or what the name of the boat was, he said that his name was James Huston, on a boat called Natoma and that he had a friend named Jack Larsen there. His father discovered that there has been a Navy pilot named James Huston from the USS Natoma Bay, who had indeed been shot down at Iwo Jima. And another pilot on the Natoma Bay was named Jack Larsen. When given a model of a Corsair airplane for a toy, the young James noted mistakes in the design, which turned out to be correct. While investigating these memories, the scientists discovered that none of the other pilots on James' mission saw where his plane was hit. It was only years later from a veteran on another ship who had witnessed Huston's plane coming down, confirmed that he had indeed taken 'a direct hit on the nose' as young James' had declared. Yet by the time he was twelve, James Leininger no longer remembered these things.

Or there are the memories of Ryan, a five-year-old from Oklahoma, who missed his 'old' home in Hollywood. He would cry and plead with his mother to take him home, so he could see his 'other' family. His parents didn't take all this very seriously until a few months later, when he began having nightmares, waking up in the middle of the night grabbing his chest and

saying that he couldn't breathe, that his heart had exploded. He also described to his mother what it was like when you died; there was an awesome bright light, he said, and everyone you knew comes back. He described how he worked for an agency in his past life, where everyone changed their name, and that he had visited New York, Rome, and Paris, where there was a 'big tower'. The parents thought he might have been a spy in the earlier life. One day though, however, his mother picked up a book about Hollywood, and in there was a photograph of Rita Hayworth from the movie *Night After Night*. Ryan pointed to one of the men in the background of the photo, and say "Hey Mama, that's George. We did a picture together. And Mama, that guy's me. I found me." The men in the photograph were not identified, though his mother verified that the other one was indeed George Raft, a film star in the 1930's and 1940s, but they could not identify the one Ryan had said was him. Finally, years later, an archival movie footage consultant identified him as Marty Martyn, who was misnamed in the film credits, and who later in life opened a talent agency, where everyone changed their name.

In the end, I am not sure what to make of these stories. I found them simply fascinating. And they cannot be easily dismissed, I think, coming as they do out of the mouth of babes. They seem to reaffirm my belief that there is more to life than meets the eye, or in the words of the Prayerbook, that at death

life is changed, not ended. Indeed, the question of what happens to us after we die has haunted humankind for as long as we have records. It haunts us still, as we all inevitably lose family members and friends, or as we simply get older ourselves. Is this all there is to life? What happens to us when we die? These are eternal questions.

The story of Jesus' resurrection is perhaps a more definitive account of life after death, if we can believe it, because there can be little doubt that Jesus really died. The Romans were very good at putting people to death, and the story of the breaking the legs of the thieves and piercing Jesus' side with a lance would seem to confirm his demise. The Romans were unlikely to let Joseph of Arimathea take the body down from the cross unless they were certain that Jesus was really, really dead. And yet we have this whole mysterious series of Resurrection appearances for several weeks thereafter from a variety of sources that haunt us still.

This does not appear to be some great religious conspiracy as some sceptics suggest, for Jesus' disciples themselves seem totally unprepared for this event and unbelieving of it as it unfolded. They weren't looking for the resurrection; they were hiding behind closed doors in fear of the Jews authorities. What happened that first Easter morning so long ago was completely unexpected, as women came to the tomb to finish the burial

preparations that had been hurried on Friday night before the Sabbath. Each of the disciples who saw the Empty Tomb, thought first that the grave had been robbed, not that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Thus, Jesus' appearances were an epiphany of the power of God. It was a mystery, and the disciples telling of those stories are themselves evidence of the unexpectedness of Jesus' resurrection, and of its truth.

For the various Gospel accounts disagree with one another in detailing the Resurrection, time after time after time. For instance, in John's account, Mary Magdalene seems to go alone to the tomb on that first Easter morning. In Matthew's account, it is Mary Magdalene and Mary who go. Mark, however, adds Salome with the other two. And Luke names Joanna and says that even more unnamed women were present. In Mark's account, the women discover a young man, robed in white, who announces the resurrection. In Matthew's account, he is identified as an angel. In Luke's version, there are two angels. In the Fourth Gospel, there are two angels and then Jesus himself appears, as he does later in Matthew.

When Mary Magdalene comes upon the Risen Jesus in John's Gospel, he specifically tells her not to touch him, but when the Risen Jesus appears to the doubting Thomas, he specifically invites him to put his fingers in the print of the nails, and to put his hand in his side. When the Risen Jesus appears to the

disciples in Jerusalem, he scolds them for this disbelief, saying "Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And yet, when he appears to the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, he is unrecognized at first until he breaks the bread at dinner, and then he suddenly vanishes out of sight, and elsewhere appears to walk through closed doors. In Mark's account the disciples are told that they will see the Resurrected Jesus in Galilee, while in John's and Matthew's account they see him in Jerusalem.

There is a total confusion in the retelling of this story, except for one fact, one undeniable fact, namely, that God did something very powerful and very unexpected that first Easter morning, that God raised Jesus from the dead, in some fashion or another, and that there is therefore, life after life, eternal life as the Church calls it. Those early Christians, just like Christians today, will often disagree amongst themselves about the facts and will often disagree about what it all means. But because of the stories of those early disciples, and others like them, we all can remain united as Christians on this day in asserting our faith in God's mysterious power, and in affirming that there is indeed life after death, and that by following the way of Jesus, we can partake of that eternal life, as we

proclaim boldly today in faith: Alleluia. Christ is risen! The
Lord is risen indeed. AMEN.