

## "Easter is For Everyone"

The story may not be true, but it persists: During the 1930s, at the height of the Soviet Union's anti-religious campaigns, prominent Communist leader Nikolai Bukharin, was said to have traveled to Kiev to deliver a speech denouncing religion and promoting atheism. Before a large audience, Bukharin spent an hour systematically attacking Christianity, presenting arguments and "proofs" against its validity. When he finished, he asked the crowd if there were any questions.

An Orthodox priest walked to the stage. Facing the audience, he simply said, "Christ is Risen!" And the crowd responded as one: "He is Risen Indeed!" The traditional Paschal greeting has been part of the Easter celebration for centuries, and the story stands as a parable of the persistence of faith in spite of persecution or negligence. Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!**

According to a recent survey, most Americans [53%] say the Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true. And 40% say modern science disproves the Bible. Still, the same survey found that almost two-thirds of those surveyed believe in the resurrection. The Easter Story persists!

And I am convinced that it's more than a story. Something life-transforming happened on that First Day (and in the days that followed)! I'm convinced, in part because the accounts are so divergent. If they were making up a tale, the Gospels would have got their story straight. As it is, there is not one story. The diverse Gospel accounts, far from being a weakness, show the many ways the Good News of Resurrection becomes real.

In Luke, it's about remembering Jesus' words—first the women, then the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, then Peter, then the eleven disciples together. In John, it's Mary recognizing Jesus' voice. In Matthew, it's a general resurrection: When Jesus died on Good Friday, graves opened, and many of God's people were raised to life. The Apostle Paul met Jesus in a blinding light and a voice from heaven. And John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, experienced Christ in a vision.

The diversity shows us there's not just one way to experience Easter's wonder. We can welcome every manifestation of Easter, every celebration of life in the face of death. This is our calling as believers. Jesus' living presence surpasses all our limited definitions of Easter.

Peter's sermon in Acts, chapter 10, shows us how Easter can transform a person. Peter initially thought that he was Jesus' favorite disciple, and in the debate over whether Gentiles were welcome in the church Peter was about to declare that they had to convert to Judaism first—become part of the Chosen People, like Peter. But God expanded his vision. Peter learned that God does not show favoritism.

Peter's message states a principle that goes beyond Judaism and Christianity. God welcomes *everyone* from every nation who fears God and does what is right. This echoes Jesus' teaching: Love God, love your neighbor. It's not about theology or denomination; it's about love.

God's lack of favoritism means God doesn't choose one religion, nation, race, language, gender or sexual orientation over another. We are not exclusive on Easter. Whether you celebrate Passover, Ramadan, or with Easter eggs and bunnies, leave room for others to feel the joy. God is concerned for all creation. In God's economy, death is followed by rebirth; winter is always followed by springtime; life has the last word. People who come to church on Easter know this is true. Peter learned: God does not show favoritism. Everyone is acceptable.

The many resurrection stories show that our faith has room for many understandings. Don't imagine yours is the only acceptable way! Easter is for EVERYONE!

The heart of Easter is that weeping turns to joy, sadness is transmuted into happiness, fear can become love. Because Christ lives, we shall live also!

I want to invite you to help me finish the sermon today. I'd like your help in singing a hymn that isn't listed in the bulletin. It's not even in the Easter section of our hymnal, but it is precisely the point of Peter's message of Easter. It's hymn #399 in the hymnal: "God welcomes all, strangers and friends. God's love is strong and it never ends. God's love is strong and it never ends." Again, #399. I'll sing it through once, then let's do it three times together...

That is the message of God who does not show favoritism. Hallelujah! Christ is Risen! Amen.