

“The Proof of the Pudding.”

Well, now that Easter Sunday is behind us, the next big day on the Church calendar is the Day of Pentecost, which isn't until May 24. So, until then, we're in the Season of Easter. And the stories that we're going to be hearing in our gospel readings will focus on how people's lives were changed because of the resurrection. And those stories will come in all sizes and shapes.

Last week, we heard a resurrection story which described how a woman—and in the other gospels it's a group of women— whose dashed hopes and dreams are given new life by an encounter with the risen Jesus. The resurrection story in today's gospel describes how a group of men, whose dashed hopes and dreams are given new life because of their encounter with the risen Jesus. (Apparently there is no gender-bias in resurrection stories!)

In next Sunday's gospel story, some of the men in today's gospel reading are still harboring thoughts that they may be hallucinating or seeing a ghost, and so the resurrected Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish in their presence.

And so it will go.

However, it should be noted— if it's not already obvious— that resurrection stories aren't confined to the Bible. And they too will come in all shapes and sizes, and some of them will seem pretty unusual; but time and experience have shown that an unusual story can be par for the course.

It's likely that each of us here could share a resurrection story. It may not be a story where someone who was dead came back to life. More likely, it's a story where, by the grace of God, someone overcame a tremendous setback, or loss, a defeat, or a disappointment; and were able to recover a life that was both meaningful, and satisfying, and fulfilling.

Usually, our resurrection stories will involve people. But sometimes they can include animals; even animals who play a starring roll. In fact, I've been following, both on Facebook and Instagram, the story of a very itchy kitty, around whom is forming a community of hope and love, and dedicated to seeing that this

itchy kitty finds relief and healing, and a new lift. And that makes a very nice segue into my telling a you a story about *The Legend of the Tamworth Two*.

The name is actually the title of an English film, which was based upon the true story of two little pigs who managed to escape from a slaughter house. And as they managed to evade their pursuers for a number of days, and be seen having all sorts of adventures in the process, these two little pigs have captured the hearts and imaginations of a lot of people. In the end, when the two pigs are captured, their death sentence is commuted to life in an animal sanctuary in Tamworth, England.

Now, you may think that I am pushing the limits of Easter theology too far, but I would disagree, because if *The Legend of the Tamworth Two* isn't a resurrection story, what is? Think about it: the Tamworth Two are saved from slaughter, and, in their cause, a new community of supporters and believers is formed, and their story gives hope to "pigs"— or even people— far and wide. In truth, it's not bad theology, and I find the parallels between the Tamworth Two and the Disciples to be fairly persuasive.

As I mentioned before, people have been telling their own resurrection stories for nearly two thousand years; and on the other side of that coin, we have two thousand years of people listening to those stories— sometimes believing them, and sometimes being skeptical of them.

And so, when the author of John's gospel was composing his work, he knew that some of his readers would be skeptical. Therefore, from the very beginning of his Gospel, John wanted to convince his readers of the truth of the story about Jesus. But we're not necessarily talking about literal truth. The story of Jesus may be literally true— and for the most part I think it is— but that's beside the point for John. Because for John, the truth in Jesus' story is proven in the fact that it has a deep and abiding meaning for all people.

And so, in telling the story of Jesus, John uses the word "true" over and over again. He wants there to be no doubt in the minds of his readers; which makes it so ironic that, that in our gospel reading this morning, the prevailing theme is one of doubt. And the person at the center of that story is a disciple named Thomas. But more about that later.

But as I said before, truth is a big issue for John, and I'll give you a few examples of what I mean. In his gospel, Jesus is not simply the light for the world, he is the True Light for the world (John 1:9). Jesus is not simply the bread of life,

he is the True Bread for the world (John 6:32). And Jesus is not simply the vine, but he is the True Vine (John 15:1). And at what may be the climax of the gospel, when Jesus is on trial, Pilate says to Jesus “So you are a king?” And Jesus answers: “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

The message of John’s gospel is clear: Not only is the story of Jesus true, but in his life and ministry, Jesus brings out the truth about humanity, and the truth about God, and the truth about creation. In fact, John would begin his gospel with these words: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Now, let’s briefly go back to the Tamworth Two for a moment. One of the story’s subplots concerns the relationship between a newspaper reporter and the local constable. In one scene, the constable challenges the reporter about what she has been writing. He says that she’s not printing the truth. Her response is interesting: “Truth? I’m not concerned with truth. I’m selling newspapers and I want a story, not truth. I want people to tell the story again and again. It is not the truth about those pigs, but rather the legend about those pigs that’s going to sell newspapers.”

I think the screenwriter for *The Legend of the Tamworth Two* could easily have been a theologian, because he or she understands that a story is more than the stark, literal truth. Rather, a story, and especially a resurrection story, is one that captures the hearts and minds of people. It’s a story they never forget. And it’s a story that changes their perceptions about life, and God, and the world, and their place in it ... and even their perceptions of pigs.

Now we can go back to our gospel reading, and ask ourselves this: What was John trying to accomplish with that story? Well, we know that he was writing at a time when there were all sorts of strange religious ideas floating around that people were listening to. So he needed a story just as attractive and compelling. And so, his gospel comes out looking completely different from the other three, not only because he’s writing twenty or thirty years later, but also because he realized he’s writing to people like you and me. He’s writing for people who never saw Jesus in the flesh; who never walked with Jesus in Galilee; who never went anywhere near Jerusalem at Festival time; and for people for whom the Garden of Gethsemane, and the Tomb, was someplace far far away. And John knows that facts can always be disputed; but a story that inspires, well, that’s a pig of a different color.

So John tells us, again and again, that Jesus is the Eternal Truth— that Jesus is the meaning behind all things, the source of all things, and the guide and goal of an abundant life. He tells us that the proof of the pudding is in the living. And so, Thomas becomes an important link between the disciples, and everyone else who comes to faith in the centuries to follow.

And so, in our gospel reading this morning, Jesus gives Thomas a special showing— he invites Thomas to touch his wounded body— but in doing so, John includes a special message for those who don't need this sort of proof— people like you and me, who come along much later, but who still want to embrace his story:

“Thomas, have you believed because you see me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to
believe.”

The fact of the matter is, that John's gospel is the favorite gospel for so many people, and yet it has next to no “facts” about Jesus' life. And I think that people are drawn to John's gospel because they sense in it's writing someone for whom the proof of the pudding was in the way people lived their lives, the way they forgave, the way they changed the world, the way they welcomed the stranger, and the way they brought diverse people together in unity.

And do you know what? That's the way most people come to faith today. They may or may not be persuaded by long arguments and explanations. But they will come to faith when they see people who are Christ-like in their attitudes, who are welcoming to strangers, who are generous of spirit, who seem to lack any prejudice, who are sensitive of the experiences and views of other people, and so on.

That's not to say that facts aren't important, or that engaging our intellect is no longer needed. Quite the opposite: the human heart always needs to be guided by wisdom and understanding. And we should always read the scriptures critically and wisely. But we still have to be open to the Spirit leading us to finding interpretations of scriptures, whose meanings we may have long taken for granted.

In fact, in one conversation recorded in the Gospels— and I think it was in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus— Jesus has one of his characters exclaiming: “If someone were to come back from the dead they wouldn't believe!” And that pretty much describes human nature. Faith cannot rely solely on

miracles, and signs, and wonders. Rather, faith rests on a well-tried pudding recipe. Does it taste good in your life? Is it good for the world's life? If so, then it's something worth developing and nurturing.

The proof of the pudding can be seen in a congregation that seeks to worship without arrogance or hypocrisy, and who serve their neighbors without the need for recognition or reward. And it's found in the lives of people who make it through the tough things in their lives by generosity of spirit, by good humor, and a lack of recrimination. In people who develop their talents and gifts, because they know that they have something that can enrich the world. And in people and communities who are truly loving, truly alive, truly gentle, and truly filled with wonder and justice and joy.

Resurrection stories are all around us, and *The Legend of the Tamworth Two* is but one example. Everyone of you here has your own resurrection story, that we can share alongside the stories in the Bible. And the stories that we tell, may or may not be filled with lots of hard facts and verifiable evidence. But they will be stories that capture the imagination, and they will be stories that touch the heart. And they will be stories that inspire us to not settle for what life may dish out to us, but to strive for an abundant life; and a life filled with true hope and true peace.

And so, the next time you have the opportunity, tell someone your own resurrection story. Tell someone how your life has been changed by the resurrected Jesus. Because, then you can become part of that ongoing narrative that stretches as far into the future as it does into the past; a narrative that changes lives, a narrative that gives hope.

Amen.