

Believe

First Reading: Psalm 118:1-4, 18-24

Second Reading: Luke 24:1-12

Over 14 million people visit the Pyramids in Giza, Egypt each year.

You can purchase a ticket and go inside these ancient wonders of the world to view the actual 4500-yr.-old sarcophagi of these Pharaohs with names you've probably never heard before; but you better dress light, because as is the case with your grandparents' apartment at the retirement village, it can get up to 86 degrees inside.

Did you know that around 2.5 million visitors each year tour Lenin's ziggurat shaped mausoleum in the heart of Red Square? And among those, 450,000 intent souls descend the steps from the vestibule down to the 33' x 33' Funeral Hall where they can view Lenin's preserved body under glass ... well, preserved with the help of a biannual good soaking in glycerol and potassium acetate; preserved, that is, by at one point, around 200 surgeons, anatomists, and biochemists at the Center for Scientific Research and Teaching Methods in Biochemical Technologies (*and I thought a little bit of makeup and some caulk would have sufficed*).

A similarly impressive statistic would be the 120 million pilgrims who have viewed the embalmed body of China's Mao Zedong in his mausoleum

on the south side of Beijing's Tiananmen Square. One reporter observed, "While a mausoleum may not sound like a lively attraction, this particular one is a people-watching paradise ... They spend 60 minutes somberly shuffling forward in a miles-long queue just to get a 60-second glimpse of the Great Leader. Stately security personnel are stationed every few feet, reminding me that this is no laughing matter. Yet I can't help but gawk at the group of gung-ho grandmas who shove me aside to get a closer look at the casket encased in glass. Then, like the flip of a switch, they keel over, sobbing — and I mean a sudden downpour — at the sight of Mao in the flesh ... Once we reach the end, they take a minute to regain their composure before hightailing it to get back in line and do it all over again."

(Leslie Nguyen-Okwu, Ozy, May 15, 2016)

Being an introvert, I'd obviously be more than uncomfortable at the thought of millions of people peeking in on my ugly mug in the hereafter. I recall the old comedian pondering the pre-recording of a greeting from him to come from the casket as visitors approach — "Hi. Thanks for dropping by. How are the wife and kids? Don' I look like myself?"

Over 3 million people each year visit Arlington National Cemetery and its Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The solemn cadence and precision of the

select soldiers charged with guarding the tomb provide a haunting and moving experience as they honor the sacrifice of the unidentified fallen. About 350,000 pilgrims each year enter Springfield, IL into their GPS so that they may find their way to Oak Ridge Cemetery to see the stately, obelisk topped tomb of President Abraham Lincoln. 92,000 people each year will travel a little farther west to Independence, MO, where, with notable Midwestern frugality, Harry S Truman decided to combine both his Presidential library and memorial garden in one location.

And let us not forget the untold millions who with intention or by coercion (*in the case of children*) are loaded into the family car to drive to all manner of far flung cemeteries and burial grounds where they will stand before the family plot or the gravestone marking the spot where someone who sat on some branch of the family tree was laid to rest.

We make the effort to visit these places in order to connect, to remember, to reflect, to honor, and to gain a deeper understanding of the unseen web that connects us in astounding ways. Even children grow wide-eyed at the realization that their relatives walked this earth, and perhaps this very patch of earth, before Thomas Jefferson enrolled at William and

Mary. And their jaws slacken when informed that the remains of this same relative lie right under the marker or right behind the name plate. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

These tombs, graves, niches, mausoleums, and crypts are not understood to be empty, and future archaeologists will confirm it. John Brown's body still lies a-mouldering in the grave, as Frederick Buechner reminds us, but something happened in a place of the dead some two millennia ago, that alters our focus from that which was lost to that which was given and that which is possible.

On the third day, he rose again ... I believe in the resurrection of the dead. We stand and say these things on a regular basis in this place. We say these things, sometimes with muscle memory alone, sometimes with fingers crossed, sometimes with confidence, sometimes with questions and doubts, and maybe sometimes with the fear of being smited were the Lord to really know what thoughts are going through our heads as we recite the creed.

PSA — I believe the Lord does know what's rambling through our noggins, loves us anyway, and that our cogitations or misgivings have no impact on

the truth of God's intentions and actions in the darkness before dawn of that first Easter morn.

I hearken to the observation of scholar Richard Lischer, "If the resurrection were meant to be a historically verifiable occurrence, God wouldn't have performed it in the dark without eyewitnesses. 'Were you there when God raised him from the tomb? the [old] spiritual asks. No, in fact, we were not. No one was. 'Resurrection' was an event transacted between God the Father and God the Son by the power of God the Holy Spirit. Not a single canonical Gospel tells us how it happened."

Yet, that it happened, I believe and trust. I can't speak for you, but personally, in light of today's cultural, political, and theological polarities, I feel as though I'm standing in the valley of a vast wilderness bordered by the mountainous certitudes to my left and right. It is a long, long valley coursing through topics as disparate as children's books and trial schedules, and as contentious as diversity, birth control, immigration, and public education. It's hard to hear anything down in the valley for all the echoes of strident shouting and sanctimonious slander emanating from the mountains

of certitude above, and don't those voices love to think of themselves as coming from above.

The peaks of certitude become increasingly jagged when the journey comes upon the topics of God, Jesus, sovereignty, miracles, mandates, faith vs. flag, justice vs. mercy, pregnant virgins, and a resurrected Lord.

On the third day, he rose again... I believe in the resurrection of the body... On one mountain peak of certitude, you find those who cannot utter those words because doing so would violate their sense of intellectual integrity. It does not fit in their box of rational possibility. The best they can do is consign it to metaphor, knowing that the Bible has more than its share of metaphors.

I cannot deny that the resurrection is irrational and nonsensical, and yet, isn't that the point of it? Resurrection is beyond our capacity to conceive or imitate, but we live in the care of a Sovereign God, infinite and omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. What did Isaiah report about this God? *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."* What did John report about this God? *"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the*

Beginning and the End.” Are we ever in a position to conclude what this God can and cannot do?

As humans, we have learned so much, and yet know so little, as exemplified by the fact that the best we can do to describe the vast majority of what fills this universe is to call it dark matter. *Hey, check out my new AI chatbot ... That's amazing, incredible, genius, the stuff of fantasy less than a generation ago, but what is all of that? ... Oh, that? Dark stuff ... Oh, okay...*

The problem with the certitude of the intellectually presumptuous is that they are, as theologians like Karl Barth and Andrew Root would say, stuck in the immanent frame, and thus, cannot appreciate the place of mystery in Creation. They cannot see mystery for what it is and can only understand it as reason unresolved, knowledge they will attain, but not yet. Therefore, there is no room for transcendence, the domain of God.

The prophets and Jesus regularly confronted this. Both Isaiah and Jesus observed — “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” God comes as near to them as to any of us, yet amidst the beauty of the multitudinous ways the risen Jesus appears to us, it is as if they are looking at one of those *Magic Eye* images

from the 90's, you know, the screen prints that appear as a psychedelic mess until you see them at just the right angle, and they suddenly transform into a single coherent image. I was never any good at it. I definitely did not have the *Magic Eye* — *Can't you see, it? It's right there in front of you! ... Well, I, um ... No, I don't.*

So, I get it. Content within the immanent frame, they resist notions of transcendence, and with intellectual certitude, proclaim what they can verify is all there is. What we represent here in the church, in their minds, is people getting all worked up over nothing more than a metaphor from one of the many ancient origin stories. That's why faith requires humility, because you have to acknowledge the limits of the human mind, recognize that there is always knowledge that cannot be grasped by us, but only revealed to us. You have to accept that there is mystery in life and in death.

Ironically, across our valley and up on that other mountain peak of certitude, they too, have their feet firmly rooted in the immanent frame. Oh, they believe in a transcendent God. They are sure that Jesus rose from the dead (*though they're not so sure about the prospects for you and me*). They

don't stumble over the lyrics when they sing — *I'm standing on the promises of God*. There's no room for doubt, they are certain.

In fact, they are going to prove it to you. They use terms like apologetics, inerrancy, authentic faith, and they go through all these textual gymnastics to force the Gospels into one seamless, unassailably literal narrative. Maybe you went to one of those meetings back in your campus days, where the speaker up front comes prepared with charts and diagrams, and the guy (*'Cause it's always a guy. I can just see Mary and the other women of our text in the back of the room, just rolling their eyes*) ... and this guy, in the manner of a college professor, confidently proceeds in his attempt to prove to the audience, not only that Jesus rose from the dead, but how Jesus rose from the dead. They dive into scientific terms and explanations to tell you how it all came down. It comes across like an engineer trying to solve a complex issue with thermal dynamics, or a crime scene investigator revealing the forensics that help identify the murderer.

I probably wouldn't have the courage, but I would want to raise my hand and ask, *And who was there to record this? Why would you insist on explaining the unexplainable?* I return to the observation of Richard Lischer,

“If the resurrection were meant to be a historically verifiable occurrence, God wouldn't have performed it in the dark without eyewitnesses.

Meanwhile, down here in moderation valley, as the voices of certitude rage from the mountains to the left and right of us, we keep on gathering, we keep on singing, *Jesus Christ is Risen Today* and we keep on joining our voices in saying things like — *Christ is risen, indeed ... and ... On the third day he rose again ... and ... I believe in the resurrection of the dead.*

We sing and say these things not because we can prove it or fully comprehend it. So, why do we believe? Because we've been granted an understanding of the trustworthiness of God ... and ... because this Jesus told us this would take place ... and ... because frightened and sorrowful women did not hesitate to report the angel's message of Good News. We believe because, as Paul reported, *For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.*

We believe because the transcendent risen Christ continues to reveal Christ-self to us in immanent ways — as the child climbs up into this pulpit to say, *Please rise in body or in spirit*; or, as the ice wall melts between estranged friends; or, as the person, who had the courage to step back into this sanctuary after a devastating loss, is embraced by the people who love her; or, as the transcendence of the Lord is conveyed through the voices of the choir.

Why do we believe? Because we're here together and we know we are not alone. Christ is in our midst. His Spirit is at work within us. Why do we believe? Because this morning in Gaza City, a city almost completely flattened by the bombs of war, the congregations of the Holy Family Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius gathered to worship and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In their own language and tradition they proclaimed, *Christ is risen, indeed*. They sang hymns, offered prayers, prayed once again for an end to the war, and embraced each other in hope in spite of the chaos, destruction, death, and continuing threats weighing upon them.

They did not have far to travel for worship, for they have been sheltering in these churches for six months. The Greek Orthodox Church, which dates back to the Fifth Century, was hit with a bomb in October that killed 18. In December, an attack at the Catholic Church killed two members on the church campus. Yet, “the community has pulled together with daily mass services, a mobile medical clinic and a project to support the mental health of children.” (Ramola Talwar Badam, *The National*) This evening, just about three hours from now, Father Youssef will climb the stairs to the roof where he’ll receive his daily phone call from Pope Francis, who will inquire about the welfare of the members, and offer a blessing.

Over at the Greek Orthodox Church, Rami Aljelda, who works with a humanitarian organization, now lives in the church with his beautiful young family. Of his nine month-old daughter, he says the church is all she’s ever known. “She will take her first steps in the church.” He says, “We feel we are next. We feel that any moment can be our last,” And yet, he says, “When we pray, it gives hope and makes us feel we are in a safer place – but it’s just a feeling ... But what this also means is that, regardless of war, nobody can stop us from worshipping, nobody can stop us from praying this will end.”

Why do we believe? We believe because Rami believes, because Father Youssef believes, because Mia Smigiel, Blake Randle, and Gena DeChant believe that God is faithful, trustworthy and steadfast even when our faith falters or raises questions. We believe because Jesus foretold it and Peter witnessed the evidence of it. There's nothing to prove. There is only good news to affirm. Jesus Christ is risen, indeed. Amen.