

As One Untimely Born  
John 20:1-18; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8  
Easter Day, March 31, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
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When I was about five, I was a huge fan of Davy Crockett. I had a “coon skin cap” that I wore while I watched the TV show. I thought Fess Parker really was Davy Crockett. So, imagine my delight – my thrill! – when I learned that Fess Parker himself was coming to our little Texas town! He was going to appear at the local car dealership, and I could actually see him with my own eyes.

There was a problem, however. My dad was flying out on his very first business trip that very same afternoon. Flying was a very big deal in 1955, and back in those days, you could go all the way to the gate with your family member and wait with them there for their plane to board. I had never been to an airport before. I had never seen a plane on the ground. Going to the airport would be an exotic adventure. Dad’s first business trip felt like a huge honor for our family. As much as I wanted to see Fess Parker, I also felt an obligation to celebrate with my dad by seeing him off. I felt conflicted.

So, my family gave me the choice – I could go with my dad to the airport, or my grandparents would take me to the car dealership to meet Davy Crockett. I chose Davy, and I couldn’t wait to meet him and talk to him and show him my “coon skin cap.” My sister Pam chose Davy, too.

So, the big day came. My sister and I piled into my grandparents’ car and drove down Main Street. This was back when car dealerships could be on Main Street. As we got nearer, I was shocked to see a HUGE crowd overflowing from the show room, filling the sidewalks, and spilling out into the streets for blocks around. I wasn’t Davy’s only fan! Eventually, a pick-up truck made its way around the corner and parked about two blocks away from me. Fess Parker – or someone who might not have been Fess Parker for all I could see – climbed up on the back of the pick-up, said a few words I couldn’t hear, waved his coon skin cap at us, and drove off. The whole thing lasted maybe 20 minutes, start to finish.

I was soooo disappointed! Fess Parker would never know that I was his biggest fan, and I could have gone to Love Field with my dad and watched airplanes land and take off. But no, I had made the wrong choice. I was in the wrong place. I felt awful.

Later, I learned that my dad’s flight had been delayed about an hour, and he had passed all that time by talking with one of his fellow passengers – Fess Parker! I could have been there! If I had made a different choice, I could have met him in person! But no, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

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Which brings me to our two scripture passages today. We have just heard two different versions of the Easter story. The one from 1 Corinthians, by Paul, is the very first description of the Resurrection to be recorded and handed down to us. It was written in the early 50s, about twenty years after that first Easter Day. Listen again to how spare Paul’s account is:

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 [that’s Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Six short verses. Paul says: Christ died and was buried. He was raised on the third day. He appeared to all those other people. And at last, even though I did not know him personally, did not follow him, and tried to persecute his followers, he appeared even to me.

Compare this account to the richly developed scene at the tomb that we receive from the Gospel of John, the last of the Biblical accounts of the Resurrection to be recorded – sometime between 95 and 105 AD. Scene 1: Mary Magdalene finds the empty tomb and runs to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple, John. They race to see for themselves. John wins the race, but stops short of going into the cave. Peter – always brash – pushes past him and sees for himself that Jesus is not there. John follows, and the text tells us that he is the one who believed. Then they go back home. Scene 2: Mary Magdalene stays at the tomb, weeping. She argues with the angels. She even argues with Jesus himself, supposing him to be the gardener. Then she hears Jesus call her name. She recognizes his voice and runs to him, but Jesus says, “Don’t touch me. I have not yet ascended.” Then Mary goes to find the disciples again and tells them, “I have seen the Lord.” She is the first evangelist, the first to share the amazing news of the Resurrection.

This is a much more inviting account, don’t you think? We can picture it. We can imagine ourselves as Peter or John, racing to the tomb. We can hear Jesus’ voice calling to us, as he called to Mary so long ago. John’s story of the Resurrection invites us into that wonderful day.

The problem for us is that we are actually more like Paul than like Peter or John or Mary. Paul says, he is as one untimely born – just not born at the right time and place to know Jesus personally, to witness his Resurrection. We, too, were not in the right place and the right time to see the Resurrection for ourselves, to hear Jesus call our name. We are in our own time and place, and Jesus’ life can seem so far away from our own.

But Paul tells us that – even though he was not there at that first Easter – the risen Christ did appear to him in a blinding light. Christ confronted him and called him by name. Christ sent helpers to him. Christ turned Paul’s life around and gave it new purpose. So much of what we know of Jesus Christ, so much of the development of the Christian church, so much of our holy scripture is directly due to that encounter on the road to Damascus between the risen Christ and the sinner Paul.

Friends, I want to assure you that we are not in the wrong time and place to meet Jesus. We have not missed our chance to speak with him. We did not make the wrong choice. Paul’s account of the Resurrection shows that we don’t have to come to Jesus. Jesus comes to us. He sees us. He calls us by name.

So, let Easter come into our time and our place this day. Let fear and grief and death fall away. Let all emptiness be filled with God’s own light. Let new life spring forth and joy and love.

We are not untimely born. We are born into the Easter world, where death has been defeated and new life reigns. Feel the joy of the Resurrection. Find the face of our Lord in every face you see. Let Easter come to your heart this day.

We were not there on that first Easter, to see the empty tomb. But we are here to proclaim it. We were not there to meet the resurrected Christ. But he is here to meet us now. He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Alleluia!