What do you make of the events of that first Easter day? According to Luke, the women go to the tomb of Jesus early on the first day of the week. They take the spices of death to anoint his hastily buried body. When they arrive, they find the stone rolled back and the body gone. Troubled and confused, they do not know what to make of it. They are filled with fear. The angelic messengers tell them that Jesus is alive. They ask, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” They come bearing the spices of death only to be surprised by life. They rush to tell the other disciples what they have seen and heard only to have their report dismissed as an idle tale.

In spite of what we may think, Easter is not for those looking for easy answers to the big questions of life. We tend to think of the Easter message of the resurrection as a bold truth that spoken loud enough silences all opposition. If we think that way about Easter, then we have not really heard the struggle of the early Christian witnesses to the resurrection. According to the gospel writers and Paul, the Easter proclamation, “Christ is risen,” met with confusion, astonishment and disbelief before it became an affirmation of hope, joy and truth. The Easter message is fraught with challenges and filled with promise. Is Christianity only a vain faith in an idle tale?

First century questions are not as far as we might think from 21st century questions. In his book, Is Faith Obsolete?, Robert McAfee Brown notes that modern people have trouble with the Christian faith because they say it doesn’t do justice to what we call the “hard facts” of human existence. Week after week we live those “hard facts.” They say the faith is simply “an impossible return to outworn convictions” (p.16). Brown says that people either hold the faith to be important but not possible or possible but not important.

Let me explain. Some would agree with the initial reaction of the first disciples that the women’s story of the resurrection of Jesus simply cannot be. In the crucifixion of Jesus they see the power of evil conspire to defeat the most loving person who ever lived. When you look evil in the face, it is hard not to be a bitter cynic afraid to take the risk of living and loving again. Certainly, there is some evidence – a stone rolled back, an empty tomb and jumbled up linen cloths. Yet, these can be explained in other ways. Twenty centuries have only increased our skepticism. We want proof, some kind of hard evidence that meets the test of our so-called scientific world view. Our own pain and brushes with death make it hard to believe. Yes, the faith may be important, but it just doesn’t seem possible.

On the other side, there are those who act as if the faith may be possible, but it doesn’t seem important. Some continue to live as if the resurrection of Jesus doesn’t make any difference in their lives. Then Easter becomes little more than a holiday about bunnies, festive meals and the rebirth of spring. In the letters of Paul, we see that many people in the church keep on living the same carefree, riotous, bigoted and immoral lives they lived before they knew Jesus. Today, we know people who claim to follow Jesus but who are unmoved by the plight of the poor, the hungry and the elderly, and who accept anger, brutality and violence as a way of life. To these it seems quite possible to believe, but the faith does not make a difference in their lives.

Easter divides two worlds. In the old world, faith may be important but not possible or possible but not important. The old world ends with a long journey to the grave. Luke tells us that another world begins on the first day of the week.

On that first Easter morning, the women stumble upon something they have never before encountered. They discover something totally outside their realm of experience. They encounter what Hamlet calls “the undiscovered country.” Hamlet fears the unknown of what lies beyond death for no one has ever returned from the grip of death. No one, that is, but Jesus. The women discover that Jesus has been there and has returned. He is risen! He brings the power of resurrected life into the world they have known. All their weary weeks of drawing water, tending fires, weaving at the loom, running a household, managing a business and raising children take on new meaning. They realize how little they understand of their own world.

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On that first day of the week, life becomes more than an exhausting journey to the grave. Life becomes a journey of experiencing how the resurrection challenges and changes the world in which they live. The once familiar world becomes the undiscovered country. On the first day of the week, the world itself becomes the arena of the physics of dynamic unpredictability. The only thing that is now predictable is the universal bent toward life. Broken relationships can be healed; teenagers can get a fresh start; enemies can become friends; the creation can be restored; the hungry can be fed; the sick healed and the dead live again. On that first day, God fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah by creating a new heaven and a new earth, wiping away our tears, giving us abundant life, and transforming our cries of distress into shouts of joy (Isaiah 65).

The resurrection is the most important word in the history of the universe. In a universe that some say is winding down, God is winding things up. We cannot prove it by resorting to scientific experiment or philosophical argument. There is only the testimony of generations of Christians who have experienced in their own lives the power of the Risen Christ. On the first day of the week, they discover that the gospel of resurrection is the only truth big enough to make sense out of the tragedy and the beauty of life. W.H. Auden wrote in his poem, “For the Time Being,” that faith is “To choose what is difficult all one’s days/As if it were easy.”

On the first day of the week, when resurrection faith takes hold of our lives, we are invited to explore an old world with new eyes. Jürgen Moltmann has written in his book, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, “With Easter, the laughter of the redeemed... begins” (p. 303). Resurrection faith turns the world upside down. Those who live in the power of the resurrection offer their lives as testimony in a world that cannot see the truth.

On the first day of the week, a thirty-one year old physician, Bill Thomas, became the medical director of a nursing home in upstate New York. When he toured the home, he found despair in every room. He decided to attack the “Three Plagues” of nursing home existence – helplessness, boredom and loneliness – not with medication but with life. He convinced the state to allow him to make some rather unorthodox changes. It took all of his persuasive powers as a salesman to make it happen. He threw out the artificial plants and brought in live ones; he tore up the lawn and created a garden for the residents and a playground for neighborhood kids; and he brought in two dogs, four cats and one hundred parakeets. It was bedlam at first, but soon the changes had a profound effect on the health and quality of the residents’ life (Being Mortal, Atul Gawande, pp. 111-125). On the first day, he invaded the land of the dead with new of life.

Dr. Tom Long tells of his move to teach at a new seminary and his visit to what was known as the University Church. At church, he struck up a conversation with a man who said, “I’m the only non-intellectual left in this congregation. I haven’t understood a sermon in twenty years. But I’d never leave this church.” Startled by the man’s directness, Long asked why he stayed in the church. The man replied that for several years he has gone once a week with a group from the church to a youth correctional facility. The man continued, “Most of the time we play ball, sometimes we have a Bible study...Most of all we get to know them as people...I started doing this because this is the kind of thing Christians are supposed to do. Now I find I get a lot from it myself. I have found that you can’t prove the promises of God in advance, but if you live them you find them true every one” (The Senses of Preaching, p. 47).

So here we are on the first day of the week. We visit the undiscovered country; we take back to the places we live and the people we know the Easter truth, “He is risen! He is risen indeed!” On this first day of the week, we return in the power of the resurrection to the world we thought we knew so well. We see that things are not the way we thought they were. There is so much to be discovered all around us. There is so much hope where we thought there was only despair; there are so many possibilities when we thought there was nothing but dead end streets; there is so much life bursting forth when we thought there was only death. The man’s words are true: “I have found that you can’t prove the promise of God in advance, but if you live them you find them true every one.”

When the resurrection of Jesus takes hold of us and shakes us to the core, it is the first day of a new life. So, I ask you on this first day of the week how will you live the life that God has spread out before you?