**“Dark Matter and Idle Tales”**

An Easter Sermon

By The Rev. Christopher Wendell

Sunday, March 27, 2016

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford

*Come among us, O Risen Christ, and inspire us with your love. Amen.*

So, it’s a little crowded in here today! Between the flowers and the beautiful Easter art that many of you young people made…and, of course, all of us…it’s like an explosion of joy! I’m not sure we could fit anything else in here, even if we tried.

But did you know, that all of *this* stuff – everything we can see and touch, even if you count all the nitrogen and oxygen and carbon dioxide molecules in the air – all of it only makes up about 20% of all the matter that is in this room right now?

Physicists, at least the ones who write for a general audience – call all this stuff that we can see directly “*luminous* matter” because it reflects light so our eyes can sense it. But it turns out that right now, alongside all this luminous matter – the stuff we can observe directly – there is 5 times as much other stuff, other matter, here in this room among us. And not just here in this room, but throughout the Universe. Scientists call it “dark matter” because it doesn’t reflect light. You can’t see it; you can’t feel it. In fact, you can’t even observe it directly at all even if you had night vision goggles. Even if you were the most amazing scientist in the whole world with the best tools – there would still be no way to observe this dark matter directly. And yet, scientists are convinced that it exists…even though no one has ever seen it? What about you? Do you believe me? Or, does this seem to you, like a bunch of nonsense…like perhaps, an idle tale?

So here’s the thing. The reason physicists have generally come to accept that dark matter is real, even though no one has ever seen it, is because what they *can* see, what they *can* observe, is that luminous matter behaves in ways that cannot be explained in any other way. There must be some other kind of force acting upon everything in the universe to make behave exactly the way it does. And they have given the name “dark matter” to whatever is causing those forces. They know it’s real, even though they’ve never seen it.

I share all this with you not because I’ve decided to run off and become a physicist, but because it helped me earlier in my adult life to more fully embrace Jesus’ Resurrection as a core part of my spiritual identity…as something much more important than just an idle tale.

Each year, on Easter Sunday, we read a different Gospel’s direct account of Jesus’ resurrection. While they all describe the tomb as being empty, the details of when and where the Risen Christ appears, and what he is like when he returns from the dead, vary widely. In one Gospel he appears in the Galilee and acts very human: cooking fish and conversing with his disciples. In another he is only in Jerusalem, where he appears and disappears and reappears elsewhere like some kind of spirit. And in one Gospel, the Risen Christ doesn’t even appear at all.

How could these accounts, supposedly direct observations, all really be true? The Gospels were written at least several decades after Jesus’ rising. What if, these writers hadn’t actually seen the Risen Christ, but instead they had come to be convinced that he had come back to life, and then gone back to write accounts of his Easter appearances based on that belief? In fact, we know this is true about Mark’s Gospel…could it also be true about Matthew, Luke and John?

In an odd way, learning about dark matter helped me to become more accepting of that possibility. And here’s why: because it reminds me that something no one has ever seen directly might still be a real and true part of creation. Like physicists’ confidence that dark matter exists, we can have confidence in Christ’s rising, not because we have direct observations of it, but by noticing changes in the things we *can* see and observe in this world, that can’t be explained in any other way. Even if the direct testimonies of Jesus’ resurrection were not in fact eyewitness accounts, they were far from idle tales.

You see, when Jesus died on the cross, it called into question the divine origin of everything that his presence on earth embodied: compassion and self-giving love, generosity of spirit and forgiveness, reconciliation and justice. Jesus’ life among us embodied the purest expression of these holy and divine values. When he was arrested, tried, and executed by his enemies; and betrayed, denied and abandoned by his friends – it looked as though the world’s source of love and hope had finally lost out for good to the forces of fear, violence and aggression: that they would have the last word for humanity.

The resurrection is the ultimate victory of Divine Love over the human will to violence. The empty tomb is God’s way of saying the movement of love and compassion among humanity can never be destroyed – not even by the most brutal opposition. Because these values are not just good, they are divine. They are eternal. And they can never be obliterated from the universe. This is the Easter miracle. This is at the heart of what we mean when we proclaim “The Lord is Risen indeed.”

And the real proof of this miracle isn’t found in the Bible. It’s effects can be seen all around us: in our communities, in our families, in the world – in history and in the present and in the future. In every place that the power of love and compassion returns and remains, even in the face of the world’s cruelty and aggression.

We see it in the world’s outpouring of support and solidarity to people and communities victimized by terrorism, in Brussels and Ankara and Paris and around the world – a solidarity rooted in empathy and compassion, a stand against violence.

We see it in a 20 year old nursing student in Haiti who puts on her uniform each day and commits to bettering herself and her country by getting an education -- despite the tremendous odds against her: a 300 year history of colonial oppression, unbelievable political corruption, and the worsening effects of poverty and hunger even 6 years after a devastating earthquake.

We see it in a transformed spirit in Bedford after our four-year experience of coming to know and host homeless families in our schools and stores and neighborhoods – where initial responses of uncertainty, fear and even aggression, became crowded out by commitments to relationship, care and generosity.

We see it in the grace in our families when cycles of addiction are *broken* by the decision to seek treatment and find healing and wholeness and reconciliation where there has been harm.

We see it in those moments when our own hearts somehow become freed from the pessimism or hostility or self-pity that builds up in us – and we recover our commitment to being creatures of gentleness in world so accustomed to aggression.

And what about you? Where can you see the presence of the Risen Christ at work in your own life this Easter?

Perhaps Jesus’ rising was, in those first years, just a fanciful idea, a story written to describe what even those early writers knew to be true: that God’s love cannot be conquered by even the most violent, powerful forces of human evil. That when it comes to the history God’s presence in the world, there is always another chapter still to write.

I don’t know how Jesus rose that first Easter morning. But I can say with confidence that Jesus’ resurrection is not an idle tale. And neither is the Risen Life it offers to each of us. The evidence of his rising is all around us, and with God’s help, our lives, too, can become proof that whatever darkness we may know, God’s love never died. Alleluia! Amen.