

# Jesus, still standing

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, April 24, 2011: Easter Day.*

*Based on Matthew 28:1-10.*

**H**ow do you picture the resurrection? Do you see someone floating, someone you can see through? Do you like the story drawn from another gospel of Jesus coming back and walking on the road with friends? Or the one where he comes back and walks through a closed door?

Maybe you've been to Italy and love those beautiful paintings, like the Caravaggio with our hero doubting Thomas putting his hand in Jesus' wounded side?

All the pictures, the beautiful music, the Alleluias and the chocolate eggs: it's all good. But I'll ask again: What do you see when you hear the word resurrection?

I have a hunch that what you see is unbelievable. I've been struggling for a long time to get beyond, or rather, beneath the images. Since I believe the resurrection, and I love proclaiming it the way we're doing today, I think the images are a problem. I think most of us, including especially the fundamentalists, the bible bangers, and the generally lazy and clueless, have just not read the Bible.

Frank McCourt tells about how he used a nursery rhyme to get his high school English students to read what's actually on the page.

"For a whole class period," he recalls in his memoir 'Tis, "there's a heated discussion of Humpty Dumpty."

Of course these high schoolers can perfectly recite the text. I'll bet you can, too. Let's do it:

Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;  
All the king's horses  
And all the king's men  
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

Perfect. You got every word.

McCourt asks his class what's going on in the rhyme. Hands go up.

"Well, like, this egg falls off the wall and if you study biology or physics you know you can never put an egg back together again. I mean, like, it's common sense.

"Who says it's an egg? I [McCourt] ask.

"Of course it's an egg. Everyone knows that.

"Where does it say it's an egg?

"They're thinking. They're searching the text for an egg, any mention, any hint of egg. They won't give in . . . There are indignant assertions of egg . . . They're comfortable with the idea of egg and why do teachers have to come along and destroy everything with all this analysis."

They might have added, why do preachers, and biblical scholars and other—you should pardon the expression—eggheads, have to do all this analysis?

I'll tell you why. If you get a fixed idea of what something needs to be, you'll never see what it really is. If you allow a third party to substitute a way of seeing or an image for the real, you'll miss the whole meaning. You'll believe in something or other instead of the thing you say you believe in.

The heart of the matter is whether we'll take a word someone used two thousand years ago in its clearest and most ordinary sense and turn it into theology.

In the language of most of the people, and in the language in which the Christian gospels were circulated, resurrection meant standing up or getting up. That may not sound like enough of a definition, but it changed the world.

He is not here, for he has gotten up. He is standing up. They thought they had done away with the truth-teller and healer Jesus from Nazareth. They killed him, but he is standing up still.

I know this won't satisfy those who need to know what happened, and how it happened.

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by that standard, I don't know who could satisfy you about any Biblical event. How did he do it, separating night from day. Making the fishes and the animals. How did the Israelites get through the Red Sea but the Egyptians get bogged down. How did David slay Goliath? How did Elijah rout the gods of the Baal? How did Jesus walk on water?

I know the questions won't go away, but I just don't think they have to be the deal breakers.

My faith, the faith of the Christian movement, is that Jesus, who certainly died, was seen to stand up. All that he did and taught, all that loving rule-breaking, all that pioneering socializing, breaking sacred boundaries, all that healing, all that righteous anger put to good use to upend the foolish and the clueless, all of that still stands.

They say we are "Easter people." That means that we stand up, too.

Just because you can't affirm a highly complicated, many-layered, often fantastical theological meaning of the word resurrection, doesn't mean you don't believe plenty. If you can do what St. Paul did years before the gospels were written and affirm that for you Jesus stood up, and he still stands in your life, then you're in.

But let me warn you, in the midst of all these lilies and anthems and pretty hats, saying that Jesus is alive in your life, that he's a standup guy, can be rough, mysterious and costly.

He stood up and said, Love your enemies. (Mt. 5.44) That radical commandment still stands. You know it's not easy—not easy even always to know who our enemies are—but you also know the world would be way different if even half of us practiced loving our enemies. If you want to believe resurrection, then you'll stand up for it, too.

Jesus stood up and said, You can't add one hour to your life by being anxious about it. (Mt. 6.27) And that still stands as the deepest of truths. Anxiety costs you sleep, can poison your relationships and limit the adventure of living. If you want to believe in resurrection, commit now to finding out why you're anxious and working on the transformation that would have to take place in your life and stand up to that anxiety.

Jesus stood up for the right and power of setting a place for everyone at the table. He stood for the principle that someday, when God's kingdom comes alive on earth, there will be no outcasts.

Jesus stood up and said the gentle, not the violent, will inherit the earth. (Mt. 5.5) And he stood up and didn't flinch when the violent did their worst.

But who's still standing? No one remembers who they were, but many remember and still live by what he said. You can stand up for that, too.

So if you think Humpty Dumpty has to be an egg, think again.

The resurrection is a religious mystery because it's hard to do, not hard to believe. Standing up to the very end for who and what you are, standing up to the powerful and the timid (who have a life-killing power of their own), standing up even when they do their worst to you, is the deepest meaning of resurrection.

Jesus stood up and said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (Luke 6:37-38)

That is not easy wisdom, but it still stands up. No one has come up with anything better.

He is not here. He has risen. Jesus is still standing up. That deserves an Alleluia any day.

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This sermon is based on my relearning the powerful, simple, and original meaning of the word resurrection, from Professor Brandon Scott, first in his pioneering lectures for Westar Institute, and subsequently in his newly published *The Trouble with Resurrection: From Paul to the Fourth Gospel* (Polebridge, 2010). I'm also indebted to him for reminding me of the story from Frank McCourt's *Tis*, a book every New Yorker and every lover of truth will want to read.

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