

All of us have heard of Handel's "Messiah." We may know nothing about George Frederic Handel, but we know the "Messiah" (1741).

You may even know that over two hundred years later next door to where Handel lived and composed almost three centuries ago, a more recent musician called home. George Frederic Handel lived at No.25 Brook Street, Mayfair, London (from 1723 to 1749). His neighbor to the left over two hundred years later, at No.23 Brook Street? Jimi Hendrix.

Most of the pieces Handel composed expressly for Christian worship no choir ever sings and no congregation ever hears. But we do know the "Messiah."

In the Victorian era, "Messiahs" performed at Hyde Park, London's Crystal Palace at its three yearly Handel Festivals had 3000 performers and tens of thousands in the audience. Three centuries after being first performed it is still being performed all over the world. Some say it is the best known choral work in Western music.

But as well as we think we know Handel's, "Messiah," do we really? When you hear the "Messiah" in your head, you hear a phrase: *"I know that my Redeemer lives."* But do you know where that phrase comes from? The most famous passage of Handel's Messiah, the song of praise to hope and resurrection, "I know that my Redeemer lives" . . . comes from one of the angriest, most rebellious, and death depressing books in the Bible. The Book of Job, chapter 19, verse 25.

We all learn about the reality of death differently. For some of us it is through family funerals, elderly loved ones are honored and prayed for, and then put to rest through time-honored traditions. For some of us the harsh reality of a sudden accident or violent act makes the fragility of life all too apparent. For others it is a loving, long term involvement in the gradual decline of a loved one, caring, watching, waiting for the end.

For small children the first “loss” is often that of a pet — their first realization that life has a life-span. For me it was my dog Ace, for our son Andre it was his hamster, Killer.

One six-year old girl had as her “first pet” a horned toad. A horned toad is a prickly, pointy reptile creature, like a frog with a hard, scaly dry skin. Still this small creature was her pet, and so she faithfully fed it, watered it, and kept it safe in its cage. Then one day the horned toad managed to escape. For days the family looked for him.

Weeks later poor “Toady” was discovered inside a box, under a bed, dead. At least he looked dead. But the little girl knew that some reptiles hibernated for long periods, and she thought that perhaps Toady was just in a deep sleep. So she poured some water on the little horned toad’s body. Immediately the body reacted by moving, curling up, its tail twisted. It had life again.

But the first reaction of the little girl to a toad come to life was not rejoicing, but screaming in horror and dropping the box.

It is one thing to hope for a life come back to life. It is another thing to accept that there actually may be an indestructible spirit that can overcome death, that resurrection may be real.

Most of us are caught somewhere between wanting to believe in the power of resurrection and the stupefying strangeness of a life that might transcend death. As biological beings we instinctively recognize the “end signs” of physical death. Yet our spiritual selves still wait for the next act. We cannot accept the finality of biological cessation. And yet confronting that “something more” still terrifies us.

We both want and fear “forever.” The first reaction of all who witnessed the empty tomb was terror. No one rejoiced. All those first responders were frightened. They wanted to know “*What is going on?*” “*Where is Jesus’ body?*” “*What has happened here?*” In none of the gospel resurrection texts is there a reaction of joy and happiness and faith when the tomb is opened and revealed to be empty. In every instance the first human reaction is grief and despair. The first responders to the tomb expected to offer their sorrow and sadness at Jesus’ tomb. Not one expected to respond with joy and faith at the sight of an empty space. Despite all of Jesus’ messages to his disciples, they were totally unprepared for what they encountered on Easter morning.

For us who follow Jesus 21 centuries later the question is no less “in your face.” The ultimate challenge that confronts us on Easter morning is this: “What if it’s true?”

What if the God of the universe loves each and every one of us?

What if that love walked among us in the person of Jesus?

What if that love was able to transcend the finality and power of death and live again to live forever?

What if that love continues to live and walk among us today, two thousand years after that death-melting resurrection?

What if it is ALL TRUE?

But you say “Prove It!” Show me the “proof” that it’s true! How do you “prove” if it’s true?

In April 2002, 100 philosophers gathered at Yale University for a conference on ethics and belief. One of the keynote speakers was Richard Swinburne, Oxford University professor and Greek Orthodox Christian. Using the tools of philosophy to explore religious faith is called philosophy of religion, and here was one of the most celebrated philosophers of religion in the 20th century choosing as his topic whether or not it could be proven that Jesus rose from the dead. He used inductive logic to bear on whether Jesus is alive. After factoring into the equation the facts of Jesus’ life as well as the testimonies after his death, Swinburne calculated the probability of the resurrection at a whopping 97 percent. He later published his “proof” of the resurrection in the Oxford University Press book *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (2003).

Now, who doesn’t want the big-gun philosophers weighing in on the Christian side, since so many are on the other side. But this is not the “proof” I’m talking about. The Bible is not a book where the truth is in the science, but rather the truth is in the story. And while the resurrection story is a fact narrative: the Son of God DID shake off those grave clothes, the stone DID roll away, the facts of “He’s Alive!” must be taken in faith. The truth is this: it’s a leap of faith either way.

So I ask again: What if it's true?

What if Jesus did rise from the dead?

What if Jesus did make eternal life possible for each and every one of us because of what he did on the cross?

What if “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life?”

What if it is ALL TRUE? What if...

The most astounding, transforming truth of Easter morning is this: whether Jesus broke the power of death or not, it is a power that still continues today. He is ALIVE and that means everything has changed? Everything has changed!

Easter Sunday is when we “refresh” our spiritual memory and reconnect to our most basic spiritual connection — our faith that Jesus Christ defeated death, rose from the dead, and demonstrated that divine power and love can never be held captive by the grip of suffering and death. Easter is the time when we renew our confession of faith in something that defies logic and cannot be rationally proven. In “online” language, it is the time when we hit our spiritual “refresh” icon, bringing our daily lives back into sync with our spiritual commitments and faith.

That's why the highest point in Handel's "Messiah" is a direct quote from Job 19:25, the confession of a man who suffered greatly on earth and yet knew in his soul that there was "something more." Job knew that God's love and God's promises were real. His spirit knew that "it was true." In his moment of deepest despair and darkness Job could still find the fragment of faith within himself that could confess, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

Any of you who have participated in my study groups know that when it comes to faith I am a sceptic about many things. I am I admit a proclaimer of progressive Christianity and I question and hold doubt about many things including the resurrection. I cannot prove it but I have come to a point in my faith journey whereby proof does not matter.

Quite simply "I know . . . I KNOW! . . . I KNOW that my Redeemer lives!"

He lives in us and He lives among us.

And that is the proof because the proof is not a point. The proof is a person; a person inside here . . . in the heart. Thanks be to God!!