I guess most of us here were brought up in Sunday School, and were taught about the resurrection of Jesus.

I especially remember an Easter hymn that we sang in Sunday School on Easter Sunday. It goes, “Up from the grave he arose. With a mighty triumph o’er his foes.” Remember that one?

The superintendent made us sing it louder and louder and so our childish voices belted it out at a great volume.

I was taught this hymn for the first time as a very little boy – maybe about four years old. I don’t think I knew what a grave was. What I heard was, “Up from the gravy arose…” I was puzzled. Then after church at the dinner table, with a suspicious eye on the gravy bowl, I said to my mother: “Mommy, what came up out of the gravy?”

Well, some of you must be thinking: Poor Harold, he got brainwashed about the resurrection as a little kid, and he’s still stuck with it..

Now, the whole story of the resurrection is difficult for many people. Of course, it’s hard to believe. And I appreciate skepticism and critical thinking. We shouldn’t just believe everything we’re told. After all, as kids we’re told about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Is the resurrection in the same category?

So perhaps we should consider this morning whether the resurrection of Jesus is something an intelligent adult can still believe in.

And if so, what is the meaning of this strange event?

There are those today who suggest that the resurrection wasn’t a real event; it was just a kind of metaphor. It was a symbolic way of talking about new beginnings, starting life again after a major setback.

According to this theory, the resurrection is not about Jesus at all; it’s all about us, and the way we handle the disappointments of life.

Now, sorry, but this theory has always struck me as a kind of cop out, a major retreat from a basic element of our faith.

I guess I’m quite stubborn: this is no metaphor. The people who originally preached the resurrection, and then those who wrote about it, intended to convey it as something real, a real event, something that happened to Jesus.

And I’m reminded of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, which we’ve read this morning, where he says:

“…If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain… Then those who have died in Christ are perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those that slept.”
The apostle is telling us that the raising up of Jesus from death is absolutely foundational for our faith – that without the risen Christ, Christianity is nothing.

What would Christianity be, after all, without Easter, without the risen Christ? Perhaps a vague belief that there might be a God somewhere?

Or maybe Christianity is just a set of moral obligations, a moral code to live by? Maybe the stories are there just to inspire us morally.

Like: Do your duty. Be a good person. Be more loving, be more just, be more responsible. Is that what’s it all about? Do I need to come to church every week so someone can tell me to do my duty? Don’t I know my duty already?

No doubt there is a place for moral exhortation and ethical reflection in the church. But surely, Christianity reduced to moral duties is not worth bothering about.

No, in fact, as the scripture is telling us, Christianity and the church would not exist, without the risen Christ.

Now, it’s not just the apostle Paul saying that, 2000 years ago. And not just me, this rather elderly, old fashioned minister, who was brainwashed in his childhood.

Also, the most skeptical scholars and theologians also recognize the centrality of the resurrection.

Take John Spong, for example – he’s a famous, very liberal theologian (not my favourite theologian, as some of you know) but a highly intelligent scholar.

Spong says, in one of his books, “belief in the resurrection is not an appendage to the Christian faith… It IS the Christian faith.”

So also, the very liberal New Testament scholar, the late Marcus Borg, writes: “Easter is central to Christianity.” He asserts that the affirmation ‘God raised Jesus from the dead,’ is THE foundational affirmation of the New Testament.”

He goes on: “The best explanation for the rise of Christianity, indeed the only adequate explanation is the resurrection of Jesus.”

And Borg seems to think the resurrection was a real event. He says it does not mean just that his memory lived on, as when we say Abraham Lincoln still lives on. No, the encounter with the risen Christ is “a real encounter with a living Jesus,” says Borg, and this encounter “continues to this day.”

John Dominic Crossan, another great critical scholar and a very liberal one, is also aware of the centrality of the resurrection. Concerning the appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples, he says, “They are not making it up; it’s not hallucinations.”

Now, these scholars speak of the resurrection appearances of Jesus as “apparitions.” In other words, they reject the empty tomb as legendary, and they think of the resurrection as in some sense non-physical and visionary.

The disciples, they say, have had a “vision” of a risen Jesus; something less than a real, concrete bodily presence. But a presence nevertheless.

Well, what about all that? Was the resurrection non-physical and visionary?
The earliest written account of the resurrection is found in I Corinthians, chapter 15, which we’ve read this morning.

The gospel accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were written many years later than the events they record. They’re all quite different; they contradict each other in detail.

For example, all four gospels tell us that the women were the first witnesses of the resurrection. Paul doesn’t seem to know anything about that. In I Corinthians 15 he mentions only Peter and the 12; no mention of the women.

These are fallible, human documents. No doubt there are elements in the stories that are metaphorical or legendary. Yet they also, unanimously, affirm that Jesus, having died on the Cross, was truly alive among them.

Was it physical? The answer is not simple, because the gospel stories of the resurrection are very strange.

First we should realize that these are not stories of the resuscitation of a corpse. The story of the raising of Lazarus by Jesus – that was a resuscitation story. Lazarus was mortal; he died again later.

The resurrection of Jesus was not physical in that simple sense. Jesus did not come back from the grave in a mortal body, only to die again later. No, the risen body of Jesus is not mortal.

Remember that, according to the gospels, the risen Jesus is unrecognizable. According to Luke, on the Emmaus Road, they didn’t know him, until he broke bread with them. According to the gospel of John, Mary in the garden doesn’t recognize him; she thinks it’s the gardener, until he speaks.

And he comes and goes at will. The risen Jesus appears among them in the room with a locked door. He’s in Jerusalem. Then he’s in Galilee, but he doesn’t appear to have travelled by donkey or camel. How did he get from Jerusalem to Galilee?

So they are not talking about an ordinary physical body, confined to space and time as our bodies are. He appears to dwell in another dimension, in a whole different mode of being. He is really there, but there in a different way.

So it’s not physical in the ordinary sense, but it is somehow a bodily resurrection. The risen Jesus is a bodily presence. For lack of a better term, Paul speaks of a “glorified body.”

Now, there are many Christians, probably some of you – who also reject the empty tomb. They would say that what appeared was a strictly spiritual Jesus. A kind of ghost?

Now ancient people knew all about ghosts. There were lots of ghost stories then, as there are now. But neither they, nor we, think of ghosts as having risen from the dead. We don’t build a whole new faith around them.

The NT authors insist that this was something different than a ghost. The empty tomb narrative tells us that in some strange way, by an act of God, the body of Jesus was raised up and transformed. One theologian has called it a “trans-physical body.”

So this is all very strange. No wonder it’s hard to believe; it’s completely out of the range of our normal experience.
Because this event is unique and unprecedented. An actual historical person, who was dead, is said to be alive among them in a very strange and unique way.

Now I should not give you the impression that most scholars and theologians reject the empty tomb, or think of the risen Jesus as a ghost. Certainly not. Lots of biblical scholars, theologians, historians, even Christian philosophers and scientists affirm the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Some have pointed out that the very strangeness of it adds to its credibility. It’s not the kind of story that ancient Jews would make up. Not a resuscitation story. Not a ghost story. Not a mythical story about the resurgence of nature in the spring time. No, something quite different. Something much stranger than that.

We may wonder why they would make up that he was unrecognizable. Why would they report that the first witnesses were women (since the testimony of women was not taken seriously in those days)?

I suggest it’s not helpful to think of it as a nature miracle. Like God setting aside the laws of nature. That would be a resuscitation. Rather, we can think of the resurrection as the inbreaking of the eternal into time and space.

The dead Jesus, the whole Jesus, body and soul, is given new life and taken up into the eternity of God.

So, in the resurrection we’ve been given a foretaste, a preview, into that eternal realm of God, or what we call “heaven.”

Of course you can easily dismiss all this as nonsense, as many do, because it’s so far out of the range of everything else we know.

Certainly, if we think of reality as strictly material in the ordinary sense, if there is no dimension of mystery, if there is no eternal realm, no realm of Spirit, no transcendent Lord of the universe, then of course this is all poppycock.

But must we really be so narrow and confined in our perception of reality? Maybe we’ve got blinkers on. Maybe reality has deeper, stranger dimensions than we are normally aware of. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of this.

We have experiences of wonder that can open us up to consider the reality of an eternal, transcendent realm, which has overlapped into time and space in the resurrection of Jesus.

The eternal realm, that we hear of in scripture, is surely not millions of miles away in space and time, but very close to us, and all around us.

As we hear from Shakespeare in Hamlet: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Well, what does it all mean? Why should we care if someone 2000 years ago was dead, and then alive again? What difference does it make to us? Why sing Hallelujah about it?

What is there to sing Hallelujah about in a world like this?

Oh yes, it’s a wonderful, magnificent world, with so much happiness and delight.
But there is also so much hopelessness. How do we avoid despair when we read the newspapers or watch the TV news?

Consider the unbelievable atrocity and misery going on in places like Syria and Iraq. And Central Africa, and Ukraine.

Consider the nonsense of our corrupt politics in Canada. The apparent hopelessness about climate change. Missing and murdered aboriginal women. Widespread aboriginal suicide in Canada. Abused children. Young girls trapped in prostitution.

If we look deeply into the darkness of this world, we could become very cynical. It’s enough to drive us to despair.

Then, of course, there are all the natural things: the tornados, hurricanes, earthquakes.

And the diseases that carry off people before their time, and the terrible suffering and disability that some people endure, year after year.

No, I’m not trying to depress you. I’m naming the data of despair. The data in the midst of which we in the church defiantly sing “Hallelujah.”

For Christian faith, the central fact which defeats despair, the fundamental ground of hope is the risen Christ. It’s at Easter that we sing Hallelujah, Hallelujah.

Obviously, at Easter, we rejoice in the victory of the crucified Jesus.

The victory of Jesus is a victory over human cruelty and oppression, a victory over injustice. “Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o’er his foes.”

In other words, it was a political victory over the Sadducees and Herod, and Pilate, and Caesar.

Jesus is one amongst the countless political victims of history. The innocent ones who are unjustly accused, wrongly imprisoned, tortured and executed. He is one of them.

The resurrection means there is hope, and justice, for the dead.

More than that, the resurrection of Jesus signals that God’s will for love and justice will ultimately prevail. In ways that we cannot imagine. the resurrection shows us that love and truth are more powerful than hatred and lies.

And this is good news not only for victims, but for all of us more lucky people, who are not particularly victims. Because we will all die. But at the graveside we proclaim “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is your sting, O grave where is your victory….”

And consider the grim alternative: if Christ is not raised, we live in a dark and meaningless universe, where evil and death have the last word, and where all that lies ahead is death, and nothingness.

The other point about the resurrection is the authority of Jesus. His authority as Lord derives, not just from the fact that he was a very good man, and a profound moral teacher. There are many such good men and women.
No, the unique authority of Jesus derives from his resurrection.

The first Christians called him “Lord.” Not a title given to any prophet in their tradition. We might ask: How did it come about that ancient Jews began to speak of a human being as “Lord?”

They had had great moral teachers and prophets before. They don’t call Jesus Lord because he’s a moral hero, or a great teacher. No, they call him Lord because he has overcome the power of the grave. He’s Lord of life and death.

They gave him titles, such as Son of God and Saviour. I suggest that, for ancient Jews, these titles are inexplicable apart from the resurrection.

The Christians courageously proclaimed that the true authority who ruled their lives was not the Emperor of Rome, who was indeed NOT a son of God, and NOT a Saviour. Rather, ironically, this crucified one, crucified by Rome, but raised from the dead, is the true authority, who ruled their lives, and in so doing liberated them.

So the Christians refused to bow the knee to Caesar, and, because of their faith in the risen Jesus, they had no fear of death.

Christians were hated and persecuted by Rome, not because they were bad people, but because they owed allegiance to One higher than the Emperor, none other than the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

Here, then, was a liberating authority, an authority based not in violent power, and not even in his moral teaching, but in his resurrection.

The risen Jesus, then, is our one true authority, and our true hope in life and in death.

Can we still believe in this today? Yes we can. (As Obama says) Yes, we can.

In the deep darkness of this world, the risen Christ is light at the end of the tunnel.

He is hope for a new heaven and a new earth in which love and justice reign. He is hope for the oppressed and the victims, whose suffering he shares. He is hope for all of us as we face death and the grave.

So let us stand fast in our faith. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!