

Okay, Easter is over. The crowds are gone. Let me ask you, do you believe it? Do you really believe in the Resurrection?

That is a question that was asked of me on a beautiful spring day with the sun shining through the window at McDonald's. I was serving at First UMC in Oshkosh. The person asking me was a thoughtful, successful businessman. He was the owner of the McDonald's franchises in Oshkosh. He was a big supporter of the youth group. One of his children was in it.

But personally, he had spent most of his adult life not in church. In fact, he had made it pretty clear to me that he and his wife would still not be in church, if it had not been for their son. Who, on his own, came up to his parents and said, "I want to go to church. I want to be a member of the church. I want to go through confirmation like all of my friends."

Eventually they ended up at First, and I had a chance to get to know them.

There I was sitting across from a man, with a desperate look in his eye, wondering if I really believed this piece that was so hard for him to wrap his mind around. When I said, "Yes." He said, "How could you? How can you believe a story that is so unbelievable?"

That is the question that made me think.

What about you? Do you believe in the resurrection? What do you believe about it?

If you are a little skeptical of the resurrection, you are not alone. Even Thomas, one of the original disciples, was skeptical when he heard the news. After Jesus had made himself known to the disciples, they told Thomas who was not there but out running errands.

He reacted like many people I know, "What? Jesus alive? You are crazy! I don't believe you. And unless I see proof, I will never believe."

What about you? What do you believe about the resurrection? Can you relate to Thomas? My friend at McDonald's could. In fact, I find that most people outside of the church - which, by the way, is most people in our community - have trouble believing the story of the Resurrection.

When I said yes that I believe in the resurrection, I went on to explain that no, I can't provide proof of the empty tomb. But the proof that I find convincing is how lives are changed.

I look at how the disciples changed. They went from being afraid and scattering, to being empowered and enlivened. I went on to talk about how the life that people experienced, the new life, was consistent with the life they had experienced when Jesus was alive and walking among them, and that the early church connected the two experiences and took it as proof of the action of Jesus. In fact, the church today, can still point to the experience of new life as proof of the resurrection.

All we have to do is listen to each others' stories. And you will begin to hear how God is able to take mistakes and turn it to something to be celebrated. You will begin to hear how God is able to take pain and turn it to something to be celebrated. You will begin to hear how God is able to take brokenness and turn it to something to be celebrated.

All we have to do is talk with someone like Patrick Gahagen who is surprised to be alive today. "A little over ten years ago, I never thought I would live to see the leaves change to fall," he said. Cystic Fibrosis was slowly killing him and his dream of becoming a Lutheran Pastor.

"My lung capacity was about 20 percent of normal," he recalls. "On a good day when I was completing my studies at Philadelphia

Seminary, I might have been able to walk about 70 feet without stopping to catch my breath."

Then came the summer after graduation and what Gahagen calls a miracle of modern science and God. A miracle that dramatically altered his perspective about life and faith.

Doctors at Barnes Jewish Hospital in St. Louis began an ambitious medical plan to make him as strong as possible for a double lung transplant that might let him live. The pre-surgical regiment of diet and exercise had him feeling so much better that he sometimes wondered whether surgery was a good idea. But he went ahead anyway.

"I was in terrible discomfort after the operation," he recalls. But doctors reminded him in the ensuing days that he had made the right choice. "They told me that in 10 years of doing this surgery they had never seen lungs as badly deteriorated as mine," he says.

And now, a over ten years after the surgery, he has no trace of cystic fibrosis in his lungs. Friends who recall seeing the frail Gahagen at his graduation from the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia in the spring of 1997 can't believe how well he looks today.

Gahagen's eyes sparkle. He jogs two miles each day. He is excited about being able to fulfill his dream of being a pastor. "I have a whole new perspective on things I used to take for granted," he says. "I've just returned from Florida. I noticed while I was running near the ocean that life is everywhere - on the beach, in the sea, in birds, and fish and plants. *God is constantly overcoming death with life.* It's there for everyone to see if people will just take the time to notice it."

Gahagen says his experience gave him a new perspective on Easter. "The spiritual aspects of my recovery have been more powerful for me than the physical side," he says. "I have no idea who served as the donor for my surgery, but I feel a special closeness to that person.

I don't believe for an instant that God wanted this donor to die so I could find life. But God found a way to make life possible after death, and that gives Easter season a special meaning for me."

Peter Gahagen's story highlights what the Resurrection is all about. It is about new life. It is about death not being the last word. It is about judgment not being the last word.

It is about grace. It is about hope. It is about God's love for us.

Okay. Easter is over. Do you believe it? Do you really believe in the resurrection?

I do.

Amen