

Many of you know that my bachelor's degree from Texas Tech is in chemistry. And many of you also know that after a brief stint in medical school, I taught high school chemistry in the little cotton farming town of Lockney, about an hour NNE of here.

But it's been 36 years now since I studied chemistry in college. And it's been 29 years since I taught chemistry.

I still remember the big stuff, the important stuff. But as the decades have passed, I don't remember some of the minor stuff.

I used to know all the chemical symbols on the entire periodic table. I can easily remember all the chemical symbols for well-known elements: Oxygen, Carbon, Gold, Silver, those are all easy.

But what about Rhenium and Osmium and Technetium? I have to think about those. Plus, the periodic table is open ended, and there are numerous elements now that weren't on the chart back then except as placeholders. Now they are on the chart with new names and symbols: Copernicium, Flerovium, Livermorium. I always have to look those up.

I have a step sister who was an RN. A few years ago she wanted to become a Nurse Practitioner. And she needed some help from me with her chemistry classes. I was amazed at how much I recalled of the big concepts. But there was some stuff, especially some of the more obscure formulas, that I had to look up and refresh myself on in order to help her.

So when it comes to Christianity, what is the big stuff? What is the most important stuff?

Well, one of the biggest, most important, most central pieces of Christianity is what we gather to celebrate today. We proclaim that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

And today we heard THE two earliest written accounts of Jesus' resurrection.

We heard from our Gospel lesson, from Mark, about the women discovering the empty tomb that first Easter morning.

Mark's version is the earliest written version of this story. The women come to the tomb. They find that the stone had already been rolled away. And the tomb is empty, except for a young man, an angel telling the women that "(Jesus) has been raised. He is not here."¹

Mark is the earliest written version of the empty tomb story. It was written down 35 to 40 years after that first Easter. It's 10-15 years earlier than Matthew and Luke. And it's 30 years earlier than John. And yet in this first Gospel, the Good News of Easter is VERY clear. Jesus is risen from the dead.

¹ Mk 16:5

Now you might be thinking, 'Whoa. Time out... 35 years is a long time between an event happening and Mark writing it down.'

And you might add, 'Father Jim, didn't you say a few minutes ago that it's been 36 years since you've studied Chemistry and you've forgotten it since then?'

Well actually, I said that I've forgotten some of the obscure stuff about Chemistry. But also said that I still remember the big stuff even 36 years later. And for Mark, and for the early Christian church, the biggest of the big stuff was their central proclamation that Jesus died, and was raised from the dead.

But let's suppose you're right. Let's say that 35 to 40 years between Jesus' resurrection and the writing of Mark's Gospel is such a long time that Mark might not be clear about what happened. If you're thinking that, I would point you to our other reading this morning.

Our Epistle lesson was from the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians was written by Paul only 22 years after Jesus' death. And it is the earliest written proclamation we have about the Resurrection. And in it Paul says this to the Corinthian Christians:

"I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."²

Again, Paul wrote these words around the year 55 AD, about 22 years after the Resurrection. Paul reminds the Corinthians of how years before, he had passed on to them what he in turn had been received years before that. Paul is reminding them in the mid 50's about what he taught them in the 40's. And in turn he says that he was first taught this in the mid-30's about events that took place in the early 30's AD.

So Paul is referring back to the most important thing he learned about Jesus; namely his resurrection. AND Paul learned this within 2 to 5 years of the event itself.

It's one thing to be a little fuzzy about some things after 35 or 40 years. But 2 to 5 years is pretty recent memory.

Does anyone remember the spring of 2016, 5 years ago? Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton were running for president.

Does anyone remember April of 2019, 2 years ago? Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris caught fire. That's not too long ago.

² 1Cor 15:3-4

'I handed on to you,' Paul is saying, 'the most important thing that I first learned: Jesus Christ died for us, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day.'

But you might be thinking, 'Whoa. Time out... Paul says he was taught this. That means he wasn't an eyewitness.'

You know what? That's right. Paul wasn't there that first Easter day. But the very next thing Paul does is talk about all the witnesses to the Resurrection.

Right after he says that the earliest thing he had received was the Jesus died and was raised, Paul then gives a list of the eye witnesses to the resurrection who passed the news on to him.

Paul says that after Jesus was raised, "he appeared to Cephas (or Peter), then to the twelve."

"Then," Paul says, "he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles."³

'500-plus witnesses,' Paul says. 'And most of them are still alive,' he says, at the time he wrote the letter. 'If you don't believe me,' he's saying, 'ask them.'

And then Paul says that later, he too was an eyewitness. He says that the risen Christ later appeared to him. In his words, "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."⁴

Paul and Mark agree. The good news of Easter is the biggest of the big stuff. The Death and Resurrection of Jesus was THE central, essential, most important proclamation that came from the earliest days of Christianity. It's not obscure. It's not trivial. It was, as Paul says, of first importance.

And it's still the central affirmation we celebrate today, some 1,988 years later.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. That's the biggest of the big stuff. Let's celebrate this tremendous good news.

³ 1Cor 15:5-7

⁴ 1Cor 15:8