I belong to a preaching group called The Moveable Feast and we meet once a year to study the texts for the year ahead. We invite a biblical scholar to be with us and answer our questions. These are often the questions we are asked all year long by our parishioners and so we get to turn them back to a scholar. We feel justified in asking any and all questions on our minds—because it is a safe space—and for that week we do not have to be the resident theologian but we return to the role of students. Rev. Dr. Jon Walton, is one of the most senior members of the group, and is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York City. After being in the group for five years, I have finally figured out that every year Jon asks the exact same question to each scholar. He has a slow and deliberate way of speaking and he does not ask the question with any malice but with a piercing thirst for an explanation, “So what do you think happened in the resurrection?”

Each year our group collectively holds our breath as we turn to the one in the hot seat and wait for them to try and answer one of the hardest questions in the Christian faith. “What happened in the resurrection?”

Did Jesus’ body start to decompose?
Did Jesus really go down to hell?
Was it an angel that rolled the stone away?
Did the disciples see his actual body or his spirit?
Did he open the door and go into the locked room or did he go through the walls?
Was there a real earthquake or was that a metaphorical turn of phrase?
Why was the head cloth folded neatly in the corner, what’s the symbolism there or was Jesus just well trained by his mother to not throw his dirty clothes on the floor?

No theologian or biblical scholar worth their weight will answer these questions for you. If anyone tries to answer them definitively you can just know they are bluffing. I mean it is sort of bizarre that theologians and bible scholars and even pastors’ entire careers are centered on a question that they are unable to answer. “What happened in the resurrection?”

For at least a month now, at our staff meetings I have been coached, warned, and even threatened by Pastor’s Chris and Rachel that I am NOT allowed, in no way, shape, or form allowed to make an April Fools Day resurrection joke. Only our music director Mark came to my defense and argued that it won’t be until 2029 that I would have another opportunity to do so. So sorry but I will NOT be answering the empty tomb question today with a joke but if you come back in eleven years...Chris and Rachel will be long gone so I can do whatever I want!

At Easter, it is worth asking ourselves how we might answer the question, “So what happened in the resurrection?” 1 Peter says, “Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to account for the hope that is in you.” So all of
us, who put our hope in the resurrection should be able to give some answer about it. Paul one of the great defenders of the faith has an answer...of sorts. His answer unlike the gospel writers does not give accounts of what happened, specific details that build a case but rather Paul gives us names—names of people who witnessed it. To paraphrase Paul, ‘Jesus lived, he died, and he rose again—and Peter saw him, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas and the other disciples saw him, five hundred brothers and sisters saw him, then James saw him, and then the apostles saw him, and “Last of all,” Paul says, “he appeared to me.”

Paul doesn’t answer the question ‘what happened?’ instead Paul tells us who saw the resurrected Christ. This is sort of legal maneuvering, right?—answering one question with a different answer. Who saw what, how many credible people saw Jesus after the cross? This is Paul’s answer to the Corinthians, not what happened but who saw Jesus after that first Easter morning.

I remember doing a technical climb in the Tetons with our guide leading us around some exposure and some ice on the side of the mountain. Our group was tied to each other with lengths of rope. Each of us was gingerly traversing around the ledges. Being near the back of the group there were times when I couldn’t see the guide and other times when I couldn’t even see the person in front of me. All I could see was the rope. I could feel the pull of the rope behind me connecting me to the hiker coming after me and I could see the rope connecting me to person in front of me but otherwise, at times, it was just mountain.

Faith is like that: sometimes you have your eyes locked on the one you are following with clear evidence of the path you are taking and the presence of the Almighty in your midst. And then sometimes it is more like you are walking in a fog and you do not have clear eyesight of anyone going before you or any path towards the divine, you haven’t seen Christ’s resurrected body yourself, you haven’t put your hands in his side or touched his pierced hands, all you have is a thin thread of faith connecting you to something that has gone before you and something coming behind you. Both of these experiences are legitimate in the seasons of our lives of faith.

And so on this Easter morning you can ask yourself, where are you? And if you find yourself in a time of purpose and clarity and strength then you pull extra hard on the ropes for those coming after you, you prop up the weak faith of those behind you, you preach and you serve and you teach and you mentor and you pull others around their own dark valleys and rocky paths. But if you are in a fog yourself, filled with doubt, filled with heartache, carrying the weights of this world then you just hold fast to that rope—you hold fast to the faith of the people who have gone before you and you let them, their faith, their witness, their hope propel you onward. Christian faith is a connectional faith where the good news has been passed from one generation to the next by our witness to one another that is how the gospel has and will travel.
The Corinthian’s were only a few leads of rope away from Jesus—they are once or twice removed from the life of Christ and so Paul is simply trying to make that connection stronger for them. It was Jesus and then it was the disciples and then it was the apostles and then it was me, he says, —and you know me, you can see me, you are connected to me and so you are connected to Christ—to the resurrected one. Can you hold fast to that thread? If you can hold fast to that connection then you will be saved. That connection to Jesus is our salvation. Biblical scholar Richard Hays writes, “The resurrection of Jesus and his subsequent appearance to a long list of witnesses is at the heart of the gospel proclaimed in the church; without this foundational truth, there would be no church because there would be no gospel. Those who hold fast to this truth are saved by it.”

Maybe that is the best answer we are going to be able to give in this lifetime, “So what happened in the resurrection?” Well, let me tell you...my mother believes in the resurrected Jesus and ushers at her church every Sunday. My father serves on church committees and is a faithful Presbyterian in a quiet sort of way. My grandmother was a good Catholic and prayed the Rosary every day. My grandfather was the clerk of session at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. I saw my high school algebra teacher at church every Sunday as a teenager. The counselors at my tennis camp loved Jesus and knew all the praise songs. My college roommate knew the Bible inside and out. The members of this church pray, and serve, and give money, and their families have shown up for 238 years to worship God in this place. These are threads for me, threads that connect from other faithful travelers to me and lead me towards Jesus. And so on the days when I can’t quite answer the question about what happened in the resurrection, I think of them, and I will hold fast to their faith.

Paul believes the Corinthian’s are on the way to salvation if they can hold fast. And so are we—we are people who have celebrated the resurrection of our Lord every Easter since Jesus came out of that tomb. And so we will continue to celebrate this holy mystery and we will hold fast our faith and to one another and pray that becomes a worthy defense of the hope we have in Jesus Christ. We answer the question ‘What happened in the resurrection?’ with how we live our lives. Because in the resurrection lives were changed, the lives of those who have gone before us and kept the faith, and with each one of us here today, and with all those who will fill these pews in the days and the years to come. And that is the gospel—that Jesus died, Jesus rose, and Jesus lives yesterday, today, and forever.

Amen.