It seems more and more, when it comes to having faith, that our age is drawn to ask the question, “What is the minimum that I need to believe in order to be considered a Christian?” Or stated slightly less cynically, “What does the Church say that I have to believe in order to be considered a (true) member?” I have to admit that I am not completely at odds and without sympathy for such sentiments and inquiries.

The book that I most enjoyed and found most inspiration in over the past year is entitled *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity*. I told one of my friends that I really enjoyed it and he responded: “That seems to be what most people are looking for today; a sceptical, bare minimum expression of the faith.” The book wasn’t even written by a professional theologian; instead it was written by a professional sociologist. But that book and, in a sense, our sermon series drive at the same points: first, what is the core of the Christian faith and, second, as a result, is that core the minimum of what I need to believe?

Well, hopefully, no one is getting the impression that we are trying to coerce you to believe anything here at St Michael’s. But it doesn’t hurt to boil down the tenets of belief to their true core. Surely, there has been enough added on over the centuries that, at times, the core can be hard to find. But today, in this affirmation of faith that we concentrating, I think we reach the real core of the Christian faith. Not in its totality but at least in its expression through the revelation of one person who lived 2,000 years ago in Palestine.

As you have possibly witnessed with the first two sermons in our “I believe…” series, we aren’t trying to cover the full range of possibilities every Sunday morning. You would be here well longer than you want to be if that was the case (you may be here well longer even though that isn’t the case). And so, given this admission, I am going to completely skip the affirmation of faith that Jesus descended to the dead. I do so first because I am not really sure what to say about it and second, because I don’t think it is all that central to the Christian faith. It is part
of the narrative of Jesus’ life but it doesn’t seem to be all that central to the climax.

But, maybe shockingly, I am also not going to concentrate on the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. Now, that is probably much more astounding than skipping out on the descent to the dead. Indeed, the apostle Paul wrote “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ…” He also wrote “…we preach Christ crucified.” There is little doubt that there is something central about the cross to the Christian faith. Look at any imagery in churches and the image of Jesus on the cross will probably be the most prolific (even if it isn’t here at St Michael’s). And so maybe I am missing the point, the core this morning.

But there is something else in what we are exploring today that stands at the heart of the Christian faith—not in exclusion of the cross I hastily add, but instead, it is the resolution of the crisis of the cross. About this event, metaphors can abound: it is the hinge on which the door swings; it is the solid foundation upon which a house is built; i.e., without this hinge the door would fall to the ground; without this foundation the house would crumble to the ground. It may be most helpful to get to the heart of the Christian faith by asking the following questions…

What do you think the apostles would have done with their lives if Jesus never rose from the dead? If Jesus has stayed lying dead in his tomb, do you think that there would be a Christian Church today, 2000 years later? Would there be any record of Jesus’ sayings and life if, after dying on the cross that day in Jerusalem, he had stayed in the tomb for all time? I hope you don’t see those as inappropriate questions. While they may lead us to inappropriately slice and a dice a unitive whole—the unitive whole of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus—I think they can help us to focus our hearts and minds, indeed our faith, on something integral, on the core event.

For example: During one of our Tuesday evening groups two years ago I was asked, point blank, after voicing one of my (probably outlandish)
opinions: “What is then that keeps you having faith? Why do you even have faith?” I can’t remember what I said to prompt that question but I needed an answer. And I have to admit that I was taken aback for a moment. But thankfully my brain kicked into action and I said, “I guess I still have faith because I truly believe that something happened, something describable but also beyond description, something happened on that day we now call Easter. It happened and it changed the course of humanity forever.”

We call that something resurrection. We use that term to describe what the gospel accounts confusedly tell us; that on the first day of the week, some women went to Jesus’ tomb, clearly expecting to find Jesus lying dead in it; but when they got there they found the stone rolled back, the tomb empty, men in white sitting inside, and the message, “Do not be afraid. The one whom you seek, Jesus of Nazareth, has risen from the dead. He isn’t here.” And so, the gospel accounts begin that day with an experience of the empty tomb. They continue by relating to us stories about encounters had by human beings with this absent person, this risen Jesus. Paul will do the same in his letters.

In short, something happened that day: Jesus’ tomb was found empty; people experienced his presence thereafter; by experiencing his presence their chins were lifted up, their spirit was bolstered, their faith was enlivened and the Church was born. I would venture to say, upon reflection on those questions that I posed earlier, that none of those things would have happened if the women had found Jesus still dead in his tomb that morning, and still dead the next week, and the next week, and the next year, so on and so forth.

It seems logical to conclude that the apostle’s would have gone back to fishing and tax collecting (or whatever else they were doing) if Jesus did not rise from the dead. They wouldn’t have got up on their soap boxes in Jerusalem and proclaimed the triumph of God in Jesus of Nazareth when he was lying just around the corner in a tomb or if he
hadn’t manifested himself alive to them. This is how central the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is to the Christian faith and the birth of the Church. That is bold claim. It is a tough one to defend; the bodily resurrection of a human being. It would be easier to say that his teaching, his ethical code or his sacrificial death was the irreducible core of Christian faith. Those are things that we can experience.

But we see, almost from the start, that these aren’t the claims made by Jesus’ followers. The apostle Paul states it most boldly and clearly to the Corinthians, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” It would be akin to saying, “You don’t go out and build massive buildings for people to gather in to hear vain preaching and practice a useless faith.”

But here we are…here the church is still today…here are millions of Christians throughout the world…and it is all because Jesus rose from the dead on that first Easter morning. It is all because the women found the tomb empty. It is all because people experienced the risen Jesus after that fact. In my opinion, we need to hold those two things together: the empty tomb and the experience of the risen Jesus. Not everyone would make such a claim.

For example, the American theologian Marcus Borg wrote some years ago, “As a child, I took it for granted that Easter meant that Jesus literally rose from the tomb. I now see Easter very differently. For me, it is irrelevant whether or not the tomb was empty. Whether Easter involved something remarkable happening to the physical body of Jesus is irrelevant. …It simply doesn’t matter.”

Well, I think it does matter. The Christian Church wouldn’t have been born or survived with the empty tomb alone but we can venture to say that “The tomb…had to be empty after the Resurrection for the Resurrection to be what it is.”¹ It is probably helpful to state right out that

¹ Robert Jenson, STI, 206
when we speak about resurrection we aren’t speaking about resuscitation—we aren’t speaking of something akin to the raising of Lazarus. To believe in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and by extension all flesh, doesn’t mean that he, and we someday, will come back to life like some creepy zombie from *The Walking Dead*. Resurrection is something else.

Paul describes it with the cryptic statements “the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” Another, more recent theologian, wrestles with the concept like this, “On the one hand, the transformation of the perishable into a spiritual body will be so radical that nothing will remain unchanged. ...On the other hand, however, the transformation will occur to the same earthly body that we are here: something different will not be produced in its place...there is a historical continuity.”

I would be happy to go on giving reasons why we should affirm both the empty tomb and the experience of Jesus post-resurrection, not surrendering one to the other. But that is something that, thankfully, we are able to do this coming Tuesday evening at Jonathan’s... And so, to close out these thoughts on the centrality of the resurrection to Christian/Easter faith, it seems good to give reasons why it is important that we affirm Jesus risen from the dead. Beyond pointing to the centrality of the apostle’s faith turnaround and the existence of the church flowing from the resurrection, there must be something for us today in this affirmation of faith.

Here, we can begin, and maybe even end, with one of Paul’s earliest messages put down in writing. In his epistle to the Thessalonians Paul wrote, “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of humanity, who have no hope. We believe the Jesus died and rose again and so we believe

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2 Pannenberg, Jesus—God and Man
that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.” That’s it, it seems.

The resurrection gives hope…hope beyond death and inspiration for this life. It gives us the hope, can we even say the knowledge, that in Jesus of Nazareth life continues beyond death. And in Christ, we have that same life. Doesn’t having that—that hope, that faith, that true and certain hope—doesn’t that inspire us to live now with more confidence, more faith, more hope and more love.

Doesn’t it inspire us to make the bold and courageous decisions that we sometimes have to make? And don’t we need just those things to reach our greatest potential? Don’t we need hope—hope in something other than ourselves—to face all of the hopelessness that we encounter? Don’t we need courage—the courage to sometimes look beyond the visible and obvious—courage to face our fears? Don’t we need life—the promise and hope of life which beats death—the promise of life in the face of death? The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth can, and I daresay does, give us just that: courage, hope and life. And for those reasons, it stands at the heart and it is the core of the Christian faith. Amen.