

Some of my most vivid memories of church as a young boy in the 1960s are of Easter Sunday. Attached to those memories are a mixture of feelings: discomfort, impatience, anticipation, pleasurable enjoyment, comfort, belonging. Gathering in the church parking lot at sunrise, already shivering before the service even started, I remember being impatient for the promised hot chocolate and donuts after the service. Shifting my meager weight and lifting one foot and then the other, I stood on the cold pavement in my polished church shoes, a clip-on tie clipped at my neck, my hands pocketed uncomfortably in my buttoned-up coat, as the preacher stammered on interminably over my head. And yet I felt no objection to being there, with my family, in the gathered crowd, amid the familiar congregation, undergoing this shared ordeal. As my now 66-year-old self looks back at my 6-year-old self, it strikes me that I did not then understand or have any real interest in the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. For that matter, I don't think I understood death as such, or life, really. Certainly, I did not understand what it meant to have Christian faith. But I did understand I was part of a church community, I was part of something beyond myself, and beyond my family. I belonged to a community of people who stood out in the cold on an early spring morning to mark some special occasion that had to do with some deep and deeply important meaning of life, and then had donuts and hot drinks together while smiling at each other.

And now, after 60 additional years of life experience—after 60 more Easters, after 10 years of full-time study in Christian theology, and 9 years of teaching in a post-graduate theological institution, and 16 years as a pastor—as my 66-year-old about-to-retire self reflects on my now 66-year-old self, it strikes me that not all that much has changed since I was 6. I understand and value that I have lived my life deeply immersed in a community of people trying to attend to deeply important matters and trying to live in meaningful relationship with that which is most important or ultimately important in life (the theologian Paul Tillich called God our “ultimate concern” and pointed out that whatever is of “ultimate concern” in one's life is in fact functioning as one's God). But I still don't think I really understand resurrection, or death, or life, or Christian faith. I know I'm expected to understand these things, and I sometimes sound as though I understand these things. But what I truly understand is that these are not things to be understood. These are things to be experienced, and they are best experienced in community. And sometimes they are best experienced by standing uncomfortably out in the cold very early in the morning.

What are some of your most memorable church experiences as a child?

What are some of your most memorable experiences as a part of Faith Church?

I think one of the experiences I will most remember from my time at Faith is the Maundy Thursday service, when we gather in solemn memory and reflection on the final days of Jesus' life.

As I have gotten older it has become more and more meaningful to me that Jesus, God as one of us humans, struggled and suffered, and experienced anguish and pain in the extreme. In the Garden of Gethsemane, while surrendering to the will of God, the Gospel

of Luke tells us Jesus prayed and pleaded that he would not have to go through what he was about to go through and “in his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). According to the Gospel of Matthew, in his suffering and anguish on the cross just before he died Jesus cried out “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). On Easter, Jesus rose victorious over the powers of death and darkness, but during his life, especially in his final years and days and hours, he experienced the very depths of human suffering—physical pain, mental anguish, spiritual despair. God in Christ has experienced these things—*does* experience these things and therefore understands and has deep compassion for these experiences. Sometimes it’s good to let this realization settle in as the darkness falls and surrounds us. Sometimes it’s good to just sit in silence for a time and allow the suffering and the compassion of our God and of our world and ourselves be what they are.

Blessings to all,

Ted