

Easy affirmations: Sunday, March 4

*Luke 4:1-13*

by [Hal W. LeMert Jr.](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue

Lent is the time when we prepare ourselves to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from death. So why do we begin by thinking about temptations? Because the temptations belong not just to Jesus, but to us as well. Temptations arise in every area of life, even for the most faithful, as we approach the events of Easter Sunday. And for some of us, the first temptation is to dismiss the resurrection and take from the Gospels only what seems to us more reasonable.

We should not dismiss the logical conclusions of our experiences, even when they create conflict for us. The remarkable capacity of our mind to gather data, draw conclusions and dictate actions is a gift of our Creator. It frees us from superstitions. It saves us from folly.

Our logical deductions are a lot like stones. They do not break apart easily. They are realities that we bump into as we walk along.

Suppose a stonemason is busy at work on a wall when a quantum physicist comes along. The physicist says, "You know these stones are mostly empty space? They're made up of atoms, and atoms are mostly space inhabited by bits of energy flying around in their orbits. The hardness of the stone is only a mysterious attraction that atoms have for one another." The stonemason shrugs. To him the stones are stones—physical realities that can be broken only by strong decisive blows.

The logic of the stonemason may not yield to the logic of the scientist even though both are making true observations about the stones. Neither tells all there is to know about stones. Like our conclusions about the resurrection, no one logic tells us all there is to know.

The devil says to Jesus, "Command these stones to become bread," and Jesus answers, "One does not live by bread alone." Yes, Jesus is talking about our

dependency on God. But he is also saying, “The reality of the stone is essential if we are to live in God’s creation as God intended us to live.” To change the stone into bread is to do violence to the reality that God has set before us. That reality is the matrix of life for which we are designed.

Resurrection cannot be summed up with a yes or a no. The logic we depend on in daily life is not the medium through which Jesus empowers his followers. Instead, the resurrection story requires that we think more deeply about what it is that God wants and helps us to understand.

A second temptation is to respond to the account of the resurrection in a way that is generally acceptable, popular with others. In an instant the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms and the people of the earth. “I can pour that popularity on you and give you great power if you will do as I say.” It is easy to believe that the devil has a lock on what is popular. We need only listen to the hype for *Temptation Island* to know that the devil has a great deal to do with what people tune in to see. And even in the church, popularity can be the devil’s province. It would be a rare church where one’s honesty in struggling with the issues of the faith is rewarded with popularity. If you are elected to office and asked to affirm your orthodoxy, it is not likely that you will confess that you are “still thinking about it.” But easy affirmations of the resurrection do not give the risen Christ a commanding presence in the church.

There is a third temptation. The devil calls forth a god of his making called Certainty. Certainty has power to preclude reflection on or even discussion of those things we feel sure are true. The devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says, “Throw yourself down and God will protect you. You won’t even have a hard landing!”

Here is appeal to scientific proof. Here is a repeatable experiment with empirical results. If it worked, the resurrection would cease to be a matter of faith and become an easy certainty. Certainty could replace faith. We would know Jesus was the Son of God.

But certainty has serious drawbacks. Our freedom as humans is destroyed by those who are certain. Our effort to discover God in ever new and more profound ways is laid waste when we convert beliefs into certainties. People who are certain that the King James Bible is the only true Bible, for example, are kept from a growing knowledge of scripture. Certainties can freeze our understandings and solidify the

limited data that create our prejudices.

The resurrection is a call to faith. If the resurrection is only a certainty, then Easter means this year precisely what it did last year. Isaiah reminds us that a living God is always doing new things. Jesus replied to the last temptation, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Even scientists can test only for what they envision to be possible. If we test for what we know or envision, then the god we discover will be only the size of our certainties, and as dead as our faith. On Easter we say, "He is alive!" because we are confessing a living relationship. There is always more for us to understand and much for us to do.

Resurrection invites us into the mystery of creation and into the presence of the living God. In that place, even death itself is not a certainty.