

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Easter Sunday

The empty tomb moves us from doubt to curiosity.

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Rev. Steve Filyk

April 4, 2020

Communion Sunday

Opening Hymn: Jesus Christ is risen today 243

Closing Hymn: Thine be the glory 258

Choruses: Jesus is risen from the grave 254 (1-3), He is Lord 252

Communion: Behold the Lamb

"I will never be an elder...

I don't believe in the resurrection." He said.

I'll have to admit that I was taken aback.

Here was a man who had long served the church.

He had been the superintendent of the Sunday School.

He had even led a search committee for a new pastor.

But he didn't believe that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Most people in the church take resurrection for granted.

Paul argues (and I'm quoting from *The Message*)

"If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ...

if there's no resurrection for Christ,

everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors..."

Paul goes on to argue that:

"the truth is that Christ has been raised up,

the first in a long legacy

of those who are going to leave the cemeteries."ⁱ

Most people in the church take resurrection for granted.

But not everybody believes in it.

Last night we watched the 2012 production of "Jesus Christ Superstar"

It was a fantastic production both musically, theatrically, and visually.

After the crucifixion, when the house lights came on,

I asked Amy if it was the intermission.

I was shocked to discover that the show ended there.

Just death.

No resurrection.

In Jesus' day, resurrection was a point of contention

Between the Pharisees (the scribes and laymen)
 And the Sadducees (the priests and aristocracy).ⁱⁱ

Theologian N.T. Wright notes that
 “from all that we can work out...the Pharisees
 in Jesus’ day believed in bodily resurrection.

That is [they believed] that when God’s people died they would be with God...
 until the dawn of the ‘new age’ or ‘the age to come’,
 at which point all God’s people would be given new bodies
 to share in that new world.

The Sadducees, as far as we can tell,
 didn’t believe in that eventual transformation of the world
 or of human beings...
 they didn’t believe... in any post mortem ongoing existence.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Not everyone in our day believe in the resurrection.
 Not everyone in Jesus’ day believed in the resurrection either.

Even if Jesus’ disciples accepted it as a theoretical possibility
 It is clear that they have no expectations
 That their crucified Jesus coming back from the dead.

Just consider the experience of those who first
 Visited Jesus’ tomb.

The Gospel of Luke highlights the place of women
 Among Jesus’ first disciples.

In the chapter previous to today’s reading
 We are told that a number of women
 Had come with Jesus from Galilee.

These women held vigil
 during Jesus’ torture and execution.

When Joseph of Arimathea retrieved
 The body of Jesus after the execution
 We are told that women followed the body.

And after seeing his body was placed,
 they went home to prepare
 “burial spices and perfumes”
 but then rested on the Sabbath day.^{iv}

In today’s lesson we are told that (after the Sabbath)
 they return to Jesus’ grave very early in the morning.

They are heading to the grave to anoint Jesus' body,
To honor him with a proper burial. [Show first slide]

But what they encounter astounds them.

The stone that sealed the tomb's entrance
has been rolled away.
And when they peer into the small cavern
They discover that his body is not there. [Show second slide]

The women are dumbfounded.
But even as they try to understand what is happening
Two men appear from nowhere
with light emanating from the clothing.

The women are awestruck and look away in fear.
And the men speak to them asking

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?
He is not here; he has risen!
Remember how he told you,
while he was still with you in Galilee:

'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners,
be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'"^v

Luke tells us that at this moment
The women remember Jesus' words.

Not knowing what else to do
The women leave the tomb
And return to the other disciples.

They share this incredible news from the graveyard,
but the other disciples can't believe them.

We are told that "the apostles didn't believe a word of it,
[that they] thought [the women] were making it all up."^{vi}

Not many people believe in a literal resurrection.

It seems that "In neither the case of the women
nor of the [rest of the] disciples is there a predisposition
to believe that Jesus is raised.

This is not something they expect,
secretly long to happen,
or even conceive of.

[Rather, it is something they encounter with]
 anxiety and terror and disbelief.”^{vii}

But despite the unbelievable testimony
 At least one disciple is curious.

We are told that “Peter [jumps] to his feet and [runs] to the tomb.
 [that] he [stoops] to look in and [sees] a few grave clothes...
 [and walks] away puzzled, shaking his head.”^{viii}

It is really no surprise that friends and neighbors,
 Even some leaders in the church find a bodily resurrection
 difficult to believe.

Most of us have been to funerals.
 We see caskets lower into the ground or ashes placed in a niche.

But how many of us have returned with flowers,
 Only to find the ground removed
 Or the urn knocked over and empty.

If someone told us as much,
 we’d think they were having a stroke.

We are born and we die.
 And our bodies return to the earth.
 That is the cycle of life.
 Period.

But the story of Jesus raises some interesting questions
 About the inevitability of this cycle.
 The incidents surrounding Jesus’ death,
 Invite us like Peter, to take a look for ourselves.

And a closer look at the story of Jesus
 asks us all to reconsider
 where our final end is compost.

There is the empty tomb and all the happenings around it.
 Then this negative evidence is complemented by positive encounters
 With Jesus in his resurrected body.

Just continue reading today’s chapter and you’ll find accounts
 Of Jesus appearing bodily among his disciples.

One time when he appears,
 they think they are seeing a ghost.

So Jesus shows them his hands and feet
And invites them to touch him.

Knowing that they still can't comprehend what they are seeing
He asks them for food
And eats some broiled fish in front of them.^{ix}

This is only one of many encounters with the risen Jesus
That is recorded in the Bible.

But there is additional evidence that invites a closer look.

Consider the fact despite the apostles' humble origins
They went far and wide sharing the message of a risen Jesus.

Not only did they travel great distances,
But they suffered for their faith
and in most cases met violent deaths.

Could it be that believing in Jesus' resurrection
Made them willing to endure such sacrifices?

Due to that witness and the witness of others
Within three centuries the same empire that crucified Jesus
Would officially recognise Jesus as Lord.^x

And while we shouldn't place too much value
In popular opinion I find it strangely interesting
That in post-Christian Canada polls tell us that
59% of all Canadians believe that Jesus is the
'Divine Son of God'.^{xi}

While we have been taught by culture
To deny the miraculous,
The stories of Jesus are so compelling.

Of course, we could gather all the evidence
That makes a case for the resurrection
And still end up being skeptics.

Most of those early disciples
And most of us modern followers still need a personal encounter
with the risen Jesus Christ
to make the leap of faith.

So what does that involve?

For some, like the lame beggar in Acts,

it is having prayers answered
and being healed in Jesus' name.

For some, like the Apostle Paul,
It is having a vision of Jesus.

For some, like Saint Augustine,
It is hearing Jesus speak through Scripture.

For some, like the unnamed disciples on the road to Emmaus,
It is encountering Jesus in bread and wine.

For some, like those women it is being reminded
Of what they had already heard Jesus say.

Many in our culture are skeptical about the resurrection.
Even some church leaders are unconvinced.

Which takes me back to the person I told you about at the beginning of my sermon.
"I will never be an elder...
I don't believe in the resurrection." He said.

I shrugged it off then
But if I could go back I'd challenge him:

"The first Christians didn't either.
More than us they encountered death first-hand.

And yet beginning on that first Easter morning
they encountered something completely unexpected
that has forever changed how we see the world."

Christ is risen!
He is risen, indeed!

ⁱ Selected verses from 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 MSG

ⁱⁱ See the distinction between the two groups in "Pharisee" www.britannica.com/topic/Pharisee

ⁱⁱⁱ NT Wright "Resurrection and Afterlife" *Bible Odyssey* www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/ask-a-scholar/resurrection-and-afterlife

^{iv} Luke 23:55-56 NIV

^v Luke 24:6-7 NIV

^{vi} Luke 24:11 NIV

^{vii} Paul Scott Wilson "Luke 24:1-12" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Gospels* 460

^{viii} Luke 24:12 MSG

^{ix} See Luke 24:36ff

^x See Ken Curtis "Whatever Happened to the Twelve Apostles?" *Christianity.com* www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/whatever-happened-to-the-twelve-apostles-11629558.html

^{xi} Angus Reid Institute "Religion and faith in Canada today: strong belief, ambivalence and rejection define our views" p13 angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2015.03.25_Faith.pdf