



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**Easter Sunday: April 21, 2019**

**Sermon Title: "Evidence"**

**Gospel Text: Luke 24:1-12**

**Christ is risen!** *This* is the proclamation on which our faith stands or falls. *This* is the assertion on which the Church's very legitimacy is grounded. *This* is the bold declaration that no other religion makes – that our Lord God defeated sin and death and rose again. Linked to this claim is an equally astonishing proposition that the victory Jesus won was not just for *himself* but was for *us* as well. As Paul put it, "all will be made alive in Christ." And so when we say "Christ is risen!" we are staking not just our *present* but our very *eternity* on the truth of that statement.

But do we believe it? At some point, each of us must wrestle with this most important of claims. The same was true for Jesus's earliest followers, as today's Gospel lesson makes abundantly clear. For example, consider the apostles, the inner circle of Jesus's followers. What a rollercoaster they had ridden. Plucked from obscurity by Jesus himself, they had become trusted lieutenants in a movement they believed could change the world. Miracles unfolded before their eyes. Crowds grew and surged. Even the mighty Romans were compelled to take note of what Jesus and his ragtag band of followers were accomplishing.

The apostles walked with Jesus. They regularly heard him teach. They even had the privilege of privately hearing him unpack and explain the most confusing of his parables. At times, I'm sure it seemed that no power would be able to stop or contain Jesus. For the apostles, the future seemed bright, prosperous, and overflowing with potential.

But on a Thursday evening, when they watched one of their own betray their Lord, and on a Friday afternoon, when the last bit of life drained out of Jesus on a cross, it all seemed like a distant, foolhardy dream. When they heard the astonishing news that the tomb was empty and Jesus had arisen, their hearts were too broken and their spirits too bruised to risk believing. And so they dismissed the story as an idle tale.

There are plenty of people today who would urge us to do the same. With dismayed looks on their faces they wonder how we can invest our hearts and our treasure in this incredible first century story of some guy named Jesus who rose from the dead. They dismiss it as a mere fable... a fantasy... a fairy tale.

But how do fables, fantasies, and fairy tales begin? "Once upon a time, in a land far away..." It's a standard, ancient formula, because fairy tales aren't intended to be taken factually. And so they are intentionally placed *outside* of a particular *time* and *place*. The story of Jesus though is no fairy tale. It's deeply, firmly rooted in a particular time and place. It

names specific people. It mentions specific places and events. It's a story filled with historic clues and bread crumbs because it was always intended that Jesus's story *would* be and *could* be critically read and examined and measured favorably alongside any other historic event of its era.

One of the apostles, Peter, recognized that his comrades had dismissed news of the resurrection far too quickly and carelessly. He had just enough trust in the story to at least take a look for himself. And so he went and saw the empty tomb and the linen burial clothes off to the side. It bewildered him. It might have even terrified him. What did it all mean? Could Jesus be alive? Well, even if he was, Peter imagined *himself* to be the *last* person on earth Jesus would want to see. Maybe that's why Peter staggered home in a daze, burdened by the weight of these possibilities.

Peter is representative of those who can't believe without physical evidence. We usually pin that on doubting Thomas, but Peter is right there with him. He focuses on the linens. Is that enough proof to sustain his faith? Who knows. But we likewise cling to physical, tangible things that purport to connect us to Jesus. Consider, for example, Father Jean-Marc Fournier. He is rightly being lauded as a hero for entering the burning Cathedral of Notre Dame this past Monday and rescuing priceless relics, including what some believe is the very crown of thorns Jesus wore at his crucifixion. Other relics preserved from the fire include what some say is a nail from the crucifixion and a wooden fragment of Christ's cross.

Those are indeed treasured antiquities, but there's no way on this side of heaven to know if they really are what some people claim they are. The angels in today's Gospel challenge our reliance on created things by asking, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Our faith cannot be dependent upon mere *things* like linens and thorns. Our faith is in a *person*, Jesus Christ, who conquered death for us, and lives even now.

And so this brings us to the women. In a day and age when women were treated like property, denied so many fundamental rights, and expected to be silent and invisible, three women are specifically named in this story: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. These women constitute the most delightfully scandalous part of our Easter story because *they* are the heroes. Earlier in Luke's Gospel we read how they invested both their economic resources and their hearts in Jesus's ministry. He had *healed* them when others gave them up for dead. He had *blessed* them when their friends and families had abandoned them. He had *transformed* them when their world had discarded them.

And so they had followed him to Jerusalem, to the cross, and now to the tomb, faithful to the end, ready to anoint his body. Because of Jesus, they had experienced a sort of spiritual resurrection in their lives. Surely they had heard him prophesy about his own resurrection too. But in the midst of their grief, their work, and the swirl of emotions from the past few days, even they were caught off guard when they found an empty tomb.

But the angels told them the story again. The angels reminded them what Jesus had promised. And as they reflected upon that story and how it had intersected with their own transformed lives, *they believed*. But their belief was not a private commodity to be jealously

guarded. It was a gift to be joyfully and generously shared. And so *they* became the first proclaimers of the Good News that *Jesus lives, and thus so shall we!*

As one theologian has noted, “the resurrection is more than a proposition we believe. It’s something we ‘prove’ by the way we live it out.”<sup>1</sup> The brave, holy women at the empty tomb provided the very best evidence of Christ’s resurrection by the transformed lives they led in response to the grace they had received. Even those bumbling apostles – especially Peter, who had failed Jesus most notoriously – would experience resurrection, because their encounter with the risen Christ would eventually transform them from mere *mice* into *lions of the faith*. Like the women on that first Easter day, they too would spend out their lives relentlessly proclaiming the good news that Jesus lives, and thus so shall we!

Now the baton has passed to us. How will we proclaim the resurrected Christ? Will our success hinge on clever rhetoric or a satchel full of old nails and petrified wood? No. Our call is to *be the evidence* of Christ’s resurrection through the transformed lives Christ’s grace enable us to live. As we love God and love our neighbor; as we welcome the stranger; as we strive for peace and justice; and as we live in the spirit of the Beatitudes, we will proclaim our resurrected Lord louder and clearer than all the words in all the theological libraries on the planet. We will be the undeniable evidence that *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Citations:

<sup>1</sup> Jim Friedrich, Don’t Explain It, *The Christian Century*, April 10, 2019, p. 11.