

April 21, 2019
Luke 24:1-12
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“Prove It!”

Brothers and sisters, I’m here to tell you that Jesus Christ is alive and well. Amen! You don’t have to take my word for it -- you have been saying it and praying it and singing it and the choir has been *tearing it up* with the good news that Christ is risen. Jesus is back.

Now, in case you didn’t know that he was gone, here’s a little review of the past week. The last time we were all here in this space you were waving palm branches and singing “Hosanna!” and generally carrying on about Jesus. That was a good day. Today is even better. Last Sunday we remembered Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, a symbol of humility and peace. On Thursday evening we gathered outside of these doors and had footwashing, a simple meal, and a communion service with bread and cup: just like Jesus shared with his disciples. But that is where we and Jesus parted company. He stayed awake on Thursday night while we went home and went to sleep. We went on with our lives on Friday -- went to work, enjoyed the day off school, went to lunch with friends, went shopping for the family dinner on Sunday. When we went about our lives; Jesus’ life ended. Jesus was crucified on a cross. His friends abandoned him, and in some cases denied they even knew him. The system failed him: the Roman governor--who was the only one who had the power to declare a death sentence -- was convinced that Jesus was innocent, but he gave in to the cries of the crowd and condemned Jesus to death anyway.

Roman soldiers took the opportunity for some cheap shots -- making fun of Jesus by dressing him up as king, hitting him, spitting on him -- before they got down to their real job of whipping him. Jesus was paraded through the streets of Jerusalem to a hill called the Skull, where he was nailed to a cross and died at three in the afternoon on

Friday. His body was taken down on Friday afternoon, wrapped in linen cloths and laid in a stone tomb that no one else had used. That's where Jesus has been. Forsaken, finished, dead.

Today is the day we talk about what it means that Jesus is back. It's an extraordinary claim, to say that someone was resurrected, or raised from the dead. If you're going to make a claim like that, you'd better be prepared for disbelief, skepticism, or ridicule. Somebody raised from the dead? Prove it. Well, you'd be in good company, because that's *exactly* the response that first witnesses at the empty tomb got. In each of the four gospels, these first witnesses are women. The last ones to leave Jesus after he died on the cross on Friday were the first ones back to care for his body on Sunday at daybreak.

[Slide] Luke names some of those women as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. I like this image because it captures for me the sense of this trip just as morning was breaking. From sundown on Friday to sunrise on Sunday was the Jewish Sabbath. Not only could the women not do any work -- such as anointing a body -- during that time, but touching a dead body was considered unclean. They couldn't do that on the Sabbath. They had to be unsettled when they saw that the stone that was supposed to seal the tomb was out of place. The stone was put there to keep animals or human scavengers out of the tomb, but no Jew would have moved it on the Sabbath. If the Romans had moved or tampered with Jesus' body, that would be another betrayal.

[Slide] The women were not sure when they left how they were going to move the stone to get access to Jesus' dead body. I love that an artist imagined what one of the women peering into the gloomy interior of the tomb might have looked like from inside the tomb. They would not have known what they might see inside.

[Slide] We know they did not see Jesus' body: it wasn't there. Where had the body gone? The answer, provided by angels or men in dazzling clothes, is that there isn't a body. Bodies and tombs are for the dead, and Jesus is not dead: Jesus is alive. Jesus is back.

If you are looking for scientific proof that Jesus is alive, you're not going to find it in the Bible. There were no death certificates, no medical exams, no DNA testing. If you're here today because we had a great breakfast earlier, or because you came to make an older family member happy, or because you just felt like you should go to church on Easter, but you're a little skeptical about the whole raised from the dead thing -- we're glad you're here. God bless you. You are, it turns out, just like the disciples in every single gospel account. Crazy women, what are they going on about? This woman in the pulpit at Creekside -- does she believe this stuff? To which I say, See for yourself. That's what the disciples did: they went and looked for themselves and saw that the body was gone and only the empty grave clothes were left behind.

There are post-resurrection appearances, or at least references in the gospels, but perhaps the most inspiring account is from the Apostle Paul, who would not have known Christ before Christ was crucified, and Saul -- as he was known then--was not only a skeptic, but an active persecutor of the church before Christ appeared and spoke to him on the road to Damascus. Paul talks about the significance of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians chapter 15: in verse 3 Paul says, here is the most important thing I have received: Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; he was buried, and he was raised on the third day. Paul goes on to list folks whom Christ appeared to, and says, Last of all, as to one untimely born (meaning, after Christ's earthly ministry), he appeared also to me. I was unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been in vain. God's grace was so great that Saul the unbeliever, Saul the persecutor was given the chance to become Paul the apostle. In verse 17 Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins . . . if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

Let me say this as clearly as I can: Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God. His resurrection does not depend on our belief or unbelief. Even if we had some kind of scientific proof, people still wouldn't believe it. I can't explain how resurrection works, I don't know how God did it, Jesus is a truth which is way bigger than I am, so I can bear witness that Jesus is back and Christ is risen, but I can't

prove it. I can't force anybody to believe anything. But here's what I can do, and in fact what every Christian who believes that Christ is raised from the dead is obligated to do: Live the reality of the resurrection. By the grace of God, we can live and proclaim the resurrection so that others will come to believe. Not believe in me, but believe that Christ is in me and that has made a difference in how I live my life.

I'm not talking about complex theological principals. When I say See for yourself, I mean things which unbelievers, skeptics, or folks who just aren't sure, ought to see in the lives of Christians -- not only in church on Easter morning, but in the grocery store on Tuesday evening, or at Starbucks on Saturday afternoon. We all have different gifts and personalities, but here are some things which attest to Christ alive in us:

[Slide] Joy Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God. This doesn't mean that every day will feel like dancing through a field of flowers, but if Christ has conquered death and lives in us, that is a reality which should affect how we view every part of our lives. If you believe in the resurrection, then you know that for those who believe there is always hope. No matter what the score is now, God wins. Jesus is back. We are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us.

[Slide] Sharing We should be willing to talk about our experience of being believers: how we got here, how it has changed us. We should talk about our community of faith and encourage others to see for themselves. Ron Nicodemus has been encouraging Church Board members to "cackle about Creekside." I'm not sure I love being compared to a chicken, but the idea is that if we have something good, we should let others know about it: but just remember, what we have is not our good works, or our great planning or our strategic programming: what we have is the grace of the risen Christ, who died for us while we were yet sinners, and who has welcomed us and loved us even though we are imperfect. We proclaim Christ's resurrection and that God's grace has not been in vain.

[Slide] Prayer There are many ways to pray, but prayer acknowledges that we need to make a practice of listening to God; we

need to be grounded in God's Word so that we can stand strong during the storms of life, and grow and flourish. Prayer is also a gift that we give to others, and a way of putting our own needs in a wider context. We pray because that is the example we received from Christ, who even though he was one with his Father, still took time to seek direction and pray for the welfare of others. It is Jesus who gives us the pattern of seeking not our own will, but the will of God.

[Slide] Compassion If Christ is alive in us, we will treat other people the way that Christ treated them: with healing words and touch, with a passion for justice, with welcome for those who have been marginalized or outcast. We will practice forgiveness, even toward our enemies.

[Slide] Giving and Receiving Care I don't know who you identify with in this photograph: I automatically assume that I am the one handing out coffee -- the giving person. I'm sure that sometimes I am. But it good for me to remember -- and maybe you need to be reminded, too - - that God loves both of these people equally. We all have times in our lives when we need to be ministered to, when we need to be the ones receiving the cup of cold water, the cup of hot coffee, or whatever prayer, assistance or encouragement we need. Jesus prayed for and fed and healed many people in his ministry, but he also allowed his feet to be anointed and was served and fed by his friends. We need both the humility to kneel and wash someone's feet, and the humility to take off our shoes and socks and allow someone to be our servant, too.

Sisters and brothers, if Jesus is back, if he is raised from the dead, than that proof is all around us: that proof is within us. God's power does not depend on our belief or unbelief, but every sunrise is a chance to proclaim that Christ is risen. Every day is an opportunity to live lives that prove that Christ is alive. Every interaction is a chance to invite someone to see for themselves that God's power can work even through imperfect people. Praise God! Halleluia! Christ is risen indeed.