

Sunday April 23rd, 2017
Easter II

PRAYER: O God whose rains fall upon the just and the unjust, hear our prayer. You set your rainbow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant you made with all earth's creatures. You promised that whenever the bow was in the heavens, you would look upon it and remember the bond between us.

Unlike yours, our memory fades. Though we too have a sign by which to remember-the sign of the empty tomb-we often forget whose we are. But now, in gathering here, we remember well. Look upon us, come upon us, O God; send your promise by your Spirit. Look upon us, come upon us, O God; send your promise by your Spirit. May it descend upon us like a dove. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: The Spirit of God bears witness to the presentation of our tithes and offerings; taking what is a material good and making them into a sacred offering unto God. As we present our gifts, we also look for that same Spirit to enter into our worldly lives and turn us into living sacred sacrifices to God. Let us therefore prepare our hearts as we have already prepared our gifts. The ushers will now receive the offering.

PASTORAL PRAYER: God of Peace, God of Glory; your gentle use of power amazes us. When you have most reason to scorn us, you accept us. When you have greatest reason to spite us, you forgive us. When you have infinite reason to forget us, you remember us. And you remember us with such compassion. When we have locked ourselves away in the upper rooms of our lives, you have sent your presence into our midst with a word of peace. Not blame, not accusation, not condemnation, but peace. You send us peace so that you can send us out from our hiding places with strength and power. And all you ask is that we believe. However, believing does not come easily. A little bit of Thomas doubts within us, testing ourselves as much as you. Do we believe that we can do what you ask of us, despite the risks? Do we even understand that there will be risks? In some places of our world, to believe would be endanger our very lives. What of here, in this country and in this time? When you are sending us out into the world, what are you asking us to leave behind? O Lord, are we able? We who have not seen, though we believe, shall we be able to act upon our belief? God of Peace, God of Glory, on your people pour your power! Comfort us in our doubting and strengthen us in our believing. Help us to hold nothing back but to lay it all at your feet. From doubt to our certainty, from our weakness to our strength, from our humility to our pride, from our patience to our anxiety, we give it all to you. Transform it, make our lives new. And despite our fear and trembling, send us. And remind us, every day that wherever we shall go in your name, you shall go before us lighting the path we should tread.

BENEDICTION: Thanks be to God, for you love the Christ whom you have never seen. Be glad, and the Christ whom you have never seen will appear all around you. Amen.

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John 20:19-31
“Who Can Blame Thomas?”

In 1963, during one of the saddest chapters in the Civil Rights movement in the United States, fourteen-year-old Addie Mae Collins was buried in Birmingham, Alabama. The tragedy that brought on Addie’s death was that she happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Addie was one of the victims of the infamous church bombing of a black church by white racists. What transpired after Addie’s funeral was to be expected.

As a symbol of the Civil Rights movement, and a beloved daughter, for several years her family members and other friends made the sad pilgrimage to the grave to pray and leave flowers in her memory. In 1998, Addie’s family made the decision to disinter her remains and rebury them in another cemetery. When workers set about to dig up the remains, however, they made a shocking discovery. The grave was empty. As you can imagine, Addie’s family were terribly distraught.

Unfortunately, the record keeping for the cemetery was poorly managed, and this left cemetery officials scrambling to try and figure out what happened. Several possibilities were raised like; maybe she was buried in another place, and under the wrong tomb stone. It was certainly a logical conclusion. Unfortunately, even after an extensive investigation, records search, and effort to probe failing memories of former cemetery workers, the answer to what happened to Addie’s remains, has never been answered.

No one knows where her remains are. What is very interesting, however, is that in all the speculation about what happened to Addie, one explanation for the absence of her remains was never, not even once, proposed. Nobody, not even her family, made the suggestion that Addie rose from the dead, and walked the earth again. Every other explanation, like poor record keeping or mistaken tombstone placement, was far more plausible.
(Lee Strobel: *The Case for Christ*, pg. 225)

Over the years, like many of you, I have watched many television shows like, *CSI* or *Bones*, which deal with the forensics of murder, and occasionally they have an episode where a body goes missing, or cannot be found. However, I’ve yet to see the conclusion put forward on any of these programs of a possible resurrection, as the reason for the missing body. I conclude from Addie’s story, and from what little I know of forensic science, that an empty tomb, by itself, does not prove a resurrection.

Something more substantive is needed to prove someone rose from the dead, and maybe that is a good starting point for all of us today. It is certainly a timely topic during this Easter season. So, if I were to suggest to you this morning, that someone we all knew had risen from the dead, what would it take to convince you of this statement’s truth? Is my personal word enough to convince you of something so miraculous and incredible?

Well, let’s be honest, no matter what my credibility is with you, such a claim, like a resurrection, would need a lot more than simply my word. We might conclude, that what is needed for proof of a resurrection, is the word of two or three witnesses.

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However, this too may seem inadequate, because even if a thousand people saw the empty tomb, it does not mean there was a resurrection. Besides, we might argue for more plausible, scientific explanations for what happened to the body. Having heard a report about a resurrection, we might prefer to believe that the two or three, who claim a resurrection occurred because of an empty tomb, are perhaps psychologically disturbed.

Perhaps, we think, they have become overwhelmed by their deep grief, or maybe in their longing for their loved one, they were just wishful thinking. Maybe their hopeful longing brought about some sort of fanciful hallucination. Such would have been our conclusion, if Addie Mae Collins family had begun to tell everyone, that Addie's remains are not there because she rose from the dead.

The reality is that our collective human experience, over countless centuries, tells us that once you're dead, you are dead. When confronted with an empty tomb, anything else is more plausible than the person rose from the dead. So, knowing the logic, and reasonableness of our conclusions about an empty tomb, it is clear that to prove a resurrection occurred; we need to meet the person who is claimed to have risen.

However, that too may cause problems. It's one thing for me personally to see the raised person, but what if you were the one who saw that person, and you tried to convince me of what you saw? We struggle sometimes to believe someone who saw someone we know to be still alive. How many times have you heard from someone that they met a famous person? The first word out of your mouth might be, really?!

The mere utterance of the word "really", indicates we are skeptical. We might even ask, "Did you get a picture, or an autograph?" In other words, do you have any proof you met, so and so? We are, by our very nature, a skeptical creature; and the more incredible the claim, the more skeptical we become. And so it is with this realization, that I caution us all, to be a bit more compassionate to the Apostle Thomas, or as he is sometimes, unfairly I think, referred to as "Doubting Thomas".

If we take into consideration what he saw, and experienced in the events of Jesus' death and burial, we would likely have been skeptical as well. To see someone you had loved and followed, and at least believed was God's special agent on earth, be brutalized as he was on the cross, was about as traumatic event as you can imagine. Everyone understands that no one, ever, recovers from such a nasty form of death.

I ran across a funny little story reported by Marla J. Kiley, about the accounting department of a large insurance company, which was working on its year end reports when the computers went down. *An emergency call was put in to the systems analyst. Busy with other troubleshooting, the man didn't appear until three hours later. Yet even then several clerks cheered, "He's here! Our Saviour!"*

Without a word, the systems analyst turned to leave. Panicked, the accounting manager cried in alarm, "Where are you going?" "I'm leaving," the analyst said with a smile. "I remember what they did to the last Saviour." (Humor for Preaching, pg. 49)

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Thomas knew what had happened and we cannot fault him for his skepticism. Also, we need to remember that when Jesus first appeared to the disciples, Thomas was not present. We are never told why he wasn't there, and any speculation as to his whereabouts is just that, speculation. So, as the other disciples got a full face to face encounter with the risen Christ, Thomas missed out.

Yet, to his credit, Thomas does eventually rejoin the other disciples. After all, this group of disciples had become a very close group, sharing many experiences, and as we know, familiarity brings comfort. He may have thought that at least these ten friends would understand his pain. Now imagine what Thomas faced walking into this upper room. Talk about jarring.

As you can imagine, walking into the room with the rest of the disciples, who have seen the risen Lord, what is the very first thing they tell Thomas. They just couldn't help themselves. In their joy and excitement they blurt out, almost as a group, "We have seen the Lord!" We don't know the exact process Thomas' mind went through in processing this declaration, but the conclusion he comes to is very clear.

"I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side." Thomas is skeptical, and who can blame him? He must have wondered what was going on in his friend's minds. Is this some sort of cruel joke? If this occurred today we might wonder what the disciples had been smoking or drinking.

Perhaps they had been hallucinating, or at the very best, they had seen a ghost. Almost certainly the idea that they had seen a ghost prompted Thomas' call to place his fingers in the wounds. Everyone knows ghosts do not have flesh and blood. Allowing, the possibility that they had seen the ghost of Jesus, was as far as Thomas was willing to go. However, it is very likely that he believed they had hallucinated this sighting.

A great number of modern skeptics look at the resurrection accounts in the bible, and come to the same conclusion; they were hallucinating. However, the hallucination explanation does not hold. Dr. Gary Collins, who holds a doctorate in psychology, and who has authored dozens of books on psychology and who was also the president of the Association of Psychologist in the States, dismisses the hallucination conclusion.

Collins writes, "*Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can have a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren't something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce a hallucination in somebody else. Since a hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.*" (Cited in *Immortality: The Other Side of Death* by Gary Habermas, pg. 60)

Also, psychologists report that hallucinations are relatively rare. They are usually caused by drugs or bodily deprivation. I have for example, seen numerous examples of people hallucinating in hospital after surgery, believing all kinds of illogical things. This is all due to the after effects of anesthetic. My Grandfather for example, after major surgery, believed there was a large life insurance conspiracy at work, in the hospital. When his head finally cleared, he knew he was speaking nonsense, but he just couldn't help it.

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There was, however, no way these disciples had a hallucination, especially when hundreds of other people are documented as having met the risen Jesus, as 1 Corinthians 15 tells us. (Lee Strobel, *Case for Christ*, p. 239)

Thomas was not a trained psychologist; he just simply knew that such a claim by his friends, that Jesus had been raised, was inconsistent with human experience. Think for a moment the anguish Thomas must have experienced. Like the others, he had loved Jesus, and he had committed to following him. Like the others, his vision of what he believed Jesus was trying to do for the Jewish people, died on the cross.

I wonder if, the reason Thomas came back to his fellow disciples was, that in his anguish he sought comfort and companionship. “Misery loves company”, we like to say. However, instead of entering into a shared grief, he walks into a room of excited and joyful people. It makes so little sense to him. However, it should be noted that what Thomas demands is no less than what the others had already received.

Thomas wants an encounter with the risen Christ, but more than that, he wants assurance that the Jesus they saw wasn’t simply some ghostly apparition. Therefore, what happens? “Suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. He said, ‘Peace be with you’. Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don’t be faithless any longer, believe!’”

To say things changed for Thomas would be an understatement. He sees Jesus, and hears his offer, and he shouts out, “My Lord and my God!” When confronted by the risen Christ standing right in front of him, there is only one conclusion; he is risen. The empty tomb is not enough to believe, but seeing Jesus is more than enough. Then Jesus says something that, I believe, is more for us, than for Thomas.

“You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who haven’t seen me and believe anyway.” Clearly this statement applies to us. The disciples and hundreds of others, the bible says, saw the risen Christ, and had the privilege of undeniable physical proof.

What therefore do we have? How can we believe and be blessed? John writes, in verse 31, “But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life.” What we have is the testimony of those who saw him, which again, numbers in the hundreds. We have the evidence of how the resurrection changed the disciple’s lives and the course of history.

J.P. Moreland PhD, states, “The disciples were willing to die for something they had seen with their own eyes and touched with their own hands. They were in a unique position not to just believe Jesus rose from the dead, but to know for sure. And when you’ve got eleven credible people, with no ulterior motives, with nothing to gain, and a lot to lose, who all agree they observed something with their own eyes-now you’ve got some difficulty explaining it away.” (L. Strobel, *Case for Christ*, pg. 247)

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The disciples, including Thomas, were martyred for teaching that Jesus had risen from the dead. They claimed to have seen him, talked with him, and even ate with him. If they were not absolutely sure of what they had seen, they would never have let themselves be tortured to death for proclaiming the resurrection had happened. We also have significant skeptics coming to faith after seeing the risen Christ.

The Apostle Paul is the most widely known, but also James the brother of Jesus, who in the gospels is reported to have been embarrassed by Jesus. Later, however, Josephus the historian tells us that James, the brother of Jesus, who was the leader of the Jerusalem church, was stoned to death because of his believe in his brother. Why did James' life change? Paul tells us, the resurrected Jesus appeared to him.

How did he go from persecuting the church, to being its most prolific scholar and church planter among the Gentiles? The evidence is overwhelming, and the scholarship significant. The resurrection of Jesus happened. He was seen by hundreds. What more do we need? Why can't we believe? Where is our faith?

“Because he lives I can face tomorrow. Because he lives, all fear is gone. Because I know, he holds the future, and life is worth the living, just because he lives.”

So, I ask you; why not believe and be blessed.