

Luke 24.1-12 - Easter Sunday - 4-20-25

Alleluia! The Lord is Risen. The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

At least I hope he is. I believe he is. He'd better be, or we're all in big trouble.

In my research for today's message, I came across Sermon #3452 "Belief in the Resurrection," by the prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon. The British Baptist pastor presented this sermon to 6,000 people at his Metropolitan Tabernacle in South London on September 15, 1870.

And though Anglicans don't agree with Spurgeon on the subject of baptismal regeneration, he makes some very interesting points, not only about the resurrection of our Lord, but biblical and modern Christianity's failure to truly believe it and act accordingly. He describes "The almost universal power of unbelief in the church."

Jesus said plainly, on multiple occasions, that he would rise again. Sometimes he was less obvious, like when he said "destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Or "just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Or when he compares himself to the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole by Moses to heal the Hebrews from deadly snake attacks.

But many other times, he's crystal clear. In Mark 10:33-34, our Lord tells the disciples, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

I found a list of 100 scriptures from the Bible that address how the Messiah would be rejected, beaten, that he would die on a cross, that he would rise again on the third day, and that someday we, too, would be resurrected from the dead and given glorified bodies.

How many times, and how many ways did Jesus have to spell it out? And yet, look at the reactions in today's Gospel lesson, first of the five women who went to the tomb, and then the disciples.

Not one of them expected Jesus to rise again. Oh, yes, they absolutely believed he had died. After the beating, the whipping, crucifixion, and finally pierced by a spear...no one's coming back from that.

Why did five women, including Mary Magdalene herself, bring 100 lbs of grave cloths, precious ointments, spikenard and spices to the tomb? Because they were there to embalm a DEAD BODY. They were PERPLEXED that the stone was rolled away and the body was missing. It never occurred to them that Jesus had risen, as he had repeatedly promised he would. This is Unbelief in the Resurrection.

It's entirely possible for us to love Jesus with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and serve Jesus by loving and serving our neighbors as ourselves, and still forget that HE'S NOT DEAD.

And then a couple of angels in dazzling apparel flat out tell the women to stop looking for the living among the dead, that Jesus is risen, and that he told them exactly what would happen back when they were in Galilee. Their response? First, they throw themselves to the ground in fear. And then they look at each other and say the equivalent of “Oh, yeah, now I remember. He DID say something about being crucified and on the third day rising. My bad.”

So they go and tell the eleven. And what is their reaction? The eleven chosen disciples who were closest to the Lord, who’d hung on his every word for three years? “These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” Once again, UNBELIEF in the Resurrection.

Because they believed, whole heartedly, in the Lord’s DEATH. The finality of his shameful, prolonged, and tortuous murder. That was their truth. Their reality.

In today’s Gospel, Peter checks out the tomb and confirms it’s empty. Except for the burial shroud and face napkin. But what does he do? He goes home, marveling at what had happened. He has no clue what really happened, despite being told over and over again.

What does it take to convince these people? They saw Jesus walk on water and calm the storm. He healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead. Isn’t that enough to convince the disciples that the resurrection Jesus promised would happen?

Apparently not. Their reactions to reports even from angels and trusted friends, are confusion, befuddlement, and unbelief.

We don't get it in today's Gospel lesson, but these disciples and followers of Jesus need to meet the Risen Lord, face to face. To touch his wounds, eat with him, hear his voice. Just being told isn't enough. A week later, Thomas, who wasn't with the others, hears from the most trusted sources and STILL needs to see for himself.

And even then, I'm not sure they fully grasped the significance of the resurrection until after Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And then the Apostle Paul, who explained it for us all.

Is it any wonder that many of us today struggle with belief in the Resurrection? We must live by faith, not by sight. I've seen death, and so I believe in that. Some people try to ignore it. Hide from it. But death is very real to me. My response to death is compassion. A large part of my ministry as a priest these past twenty years has been to love and serve those who are bereaved. Including my own family.

But from a ministry standpoint, I focus on giving our departed loved ones to Jesus, who is already there in that place where people go when they die. As if Jesus is waiting for us to die so we can finally see him face to face. My unbelief in the resurrection sometimes takes the form of seeing the kingdom of heaven as the realm of the dead, with Jesus as Lord of the afterlife.

I love him, I trust him, but THAT'S not the RESURRECTED Jesus. Not at all!

Do you see what I mean? Lord I believe, help my unbelief.

Spurgeon suggests that one of the ways Christians show our UNBELIEF in the Resurrection is when we doubt our own salvation. Are you confident, or are you scared to face Jesus on his throne of judgment? What can you do about that? Where is your reassurance?

Because of their unbelief in the resurrection, some Christians are still ruled by FEAR. Spurgeon says a frightened Christian is like a man who has lost his mind. Anything he tries to do is likely to make things worse.

Self-possession, calm composure, a quiet mind can save lives. If we can be calm when everyone around us is all worked up, if we can be confident of victory in the end, well, that's half the battle right there. Moses told the terrified Hebrews "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today."

We show our unbelief in the resurrection when we shy away from bold ministries and proclamations, refuse to leave our safe spaces, and are embarrassed to share our testimony.

Alleluia! The Lord is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia! Yeah? I dare you to go outside and shout it. How many of us here felt our pulses quicken? If we were SURE, there'd be no problem. See what I mean?

Psalm 27 verse 1 tells us "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief in your resurrection.

We serve a LIVING Savior. He IS risen from the dead. And that changes EVERYTHING.

For the next seven Sundays, until June 1, we will be celebrating the Season of Easter. I invite you during this time to lean into the obstacles you face in fully believing in the resurrection of Jesus. Consider how this spectrum of belief and unbelief affects your behavior as a Christian. And ask the Holy Spirit to guide you into confident faith in our Lord's Resurrection.

Because it's true. He IS risen from the dead. It HAS to be true. There's a lot hanging on this. In fact, it's everything. The Apostle Paul writes: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

Are we misguided? Or simply immature in our faith? By the way, the resurrection isn't the ONLY thing Jesus repeatedly told the disciples about. He also promised the Holy Spirit would come, and he did. And Jesus promised one other thing. That he would come again in glory.

I want to be ready for that. More ready than the disciples were on that first Easter Sunday when they were confronted with the fulfillment of Our Lord's promise to rise again. But first things first.

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