

“WHY BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS OF EASTER”

Luke 24:1-12, Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

Brothers and sisters, you probably know that this coming Friday is “April Fools’ Day;” a day that is always celebrated every year on the first day of April. It’s a day, when many Americans are expected to play some practical jokes on one another.

It is also a day when some Americans concoct some “pretty tall tales” to be sure. It’s a day when those blessed with the skillful art of telling a story will eventually have their victims sitting right there on the very edge of their seats, right there where they want them! That’s when they then expose their own pranks – by calling out loud: “April Fool’s Day, Gotcha!”

But I am standing up here this morning to tell you that the “Good News of Easter” that we are celebrating today with millions of other Christians worldwide—is no “April Fool’s Day” story!

Every year I find myself confronted with the same question: “Why do I believe the good news of Easter?” And the best answer I can come up with is—because this belief, this faith, is God’s greatest gift that he by his grace has ever given to me!” Today is a day when I have to give 100% of the credit for my faith to the powerful ministry of God the Holy Spirit! For as St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12:3, “No one can say that Jesus Christ is Lord, but by the Holy Spirit!”

Furthermore, let me tell you that trying to “prove” the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is like trying to prove the existence of God! The truth of Easter, like the truth of the Creator, is not arrived at, achieved or deduced through experiments. Belief in the resurrection is an enterprise of faith. And true faith is always an act of remembering.

One thing we all know for sure, is that something absolutely LIFE-CHANGING, something of MOMENTOUS PROPORTIONS happened in the lives of Jesus’ first disciples that transformed them completely—that converted them from being the kind of cowardly, frightened, timid followers they were at the time of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, into the courageous advocates of the Word of God that they became later, risking life and limb for Jesus, as their lives’ stories are rolled out before us in the Book of Acts!

Have you ever stopped to think that some of the biggest arguments against the reality of our Savior’s glorious resurrection would require more faith to believe that the good news we are celebrating today?

How would you respond to the contention of some—that Jesus’ first disciples were only hallucinating, when they thought they were seeing him alive that Easter day in his resurrected and glorified body?

The problem here is that hallucinations never happen to groups of people all at once! Besides this, St. Paul tells us in First Corinthians, that he was able to produce 500 people who had seen Jesus gloriously alive and back from the dead!

Or how would you respond to the contention of those who say that Jesus didn’t really die on that cross? That perhaps he had just slipped into a coma and was revived to full consciousness later? The disciples only thought that he was dead!

The difficulty here is that to believe this you would have to completely ignore three important facts: (1) First, the Romans were masters at performing crucifixions. It was a form of capital punishment that was a result of their own invention—their own chosen way to carry out an official execution. (2) Secondly, it’s a documented fact of Roman history that soldiers who botched crucifixions were themselves crucified. (3)

Thirdly, we know from John's Gospel that while the soldiers broke the legs of the two malefactors who were crucified—with one of them being located and crucified on each side of Jesus' own body, they chose not to break our Lord's legs, because they could easily ascertain that he was already dead!

Nevertheless, just to absolutely sure that Jesus was actually dead, that's when one of the soldiers thrust a spear into Jesus' side; all to insure that each of these three so-called "criminals" being put to death on that day were indeed dead; as dead as a door-nail.

And there really is not enough time for me to mention the "rapid-decay" hypothesis, where in Palestine's hot, muggy climate, some say that the body of Jesus must have simply decayed at an alarming rate.

Never mind the fact that St. Matthew tells us that when the religious leaders went to Pilate demanding that he as the Roman procurator put a Roman guard at Jesus' tomb, he told them: "You have a guard of soldiers yourselves (probably referring the temple police). You make the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard" (Matthew 27: 62-66).

When you stop and think about it, each of these theories is completely laughable. They each come at Easter from a rational, scientific angle that attempts to enter the tomb with a test tube.

In the same vain as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, all of these skeptics and detractors say: "The facts just don't add up, Mr. Watson, so it can't be true!" Presto, resurrection disproved!

But I am hoping you will bear with me long enough this Resurrection Morning to notice something in our Gospel lesson that is extremely important!

When does "Easter happen" for these women? When they come down the path to further attend to the body of Jesus, they see a stone rolled away and even enter that empty tomb! Does that do it for them? That's fairly strong Easter evidence, isn't it?

But no, an empty tomb does not do it for them. Luke only tells us, and I quote: "They were perplexed about this" (Luke 24:4)!

How about the angels—you know—the two guys sitting there in dazzling white clothes? That would be pretty convincing, wouldn't it? One could believe almost anything, it seems, if visited by a pair of angels. Angels are all the rage these days!

Was this enough to instill true faith in the lives of these women that Christ had arisen from the dead? No apparently, it wasn't! Again, according to our Gospel lesson: "They were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground," (v. 5), but still did not believe the good news of Easter just yet!

So what caused Easter to happen in the hearts and minds of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and the rest? Look closely with me at this great text from Luke. The angels don't come to these women with test tubes and all sorts of other empirical evidence! They don't try to talk them into believe that Jesus was risen from the dead, the way that the 10 apostles whom Jesus surprises with a resurrection appearance to them, tried to convince Thomas, later that evening that the story was true!

They don't try to talk them into Easter at all. They simply said: "Remember! Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise" (v. 7)!

Verse 8 that follows is short, but on it turns the whole reality and powerful truth of Easter for these women! "**Then they remembered his words!**" And it's right there; right there that Easter suddenly happens for these women right then and there and not a moment sooner!

What implications does such an Easter story have for modern Christians like us? Well, lots. We tend to want to prove it. Or disprove it. Long live the intellect! But what if Easter doesn't happen that way, not just for these women, but for anybody?

What if Easter happens largely through remembering the words of Jesus, living the words of Jesus, being so thoroughly familiar with the words of Jesus that they're more important than our next breath? Then they remembered his words.

But what if we don't know those words? What if we've forgotten them?

"Theophan the Recluse," a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church in the 19th Century, once wrote: "Everywhere and always God is with us, near to us, and in us. But we are not always with him, since we do not remember him."

Then they remembered his words. Our forgetting the words does not cancel the reality of the risen Christ in the world. But our lack of memory severely restricts Easter from happening "inside" of us.

And we are on the verge, as Christians here in America, of forgetting the words. We have a memory problem. We are inundated with 100 channels worth of words. We are bombarded with a "world wide web" of words. But the serious student of the Word of God is increasingly rare in our churches. We have stopped telling the story in our homes, stopped reading the Bible on a regular devotional basis.

A Christian author named Ellen Charry pointedly asks: "Unless our children know Jesus, what will protect them from hurting themselves and others?" (I might also ask that question of adults). "Accepting guidance from any source but the self -- and especially looking for guidance from God -- is looked upon as a sign of weaken by a great many people living in our modern day culture!"

So how will resurrection happen among such a proud people?

How will resurrection occur in rocky marriages?

In friendships that have soured? In family squabbles?

How will resurrection happen in a world struggling with addiction, poverty, and racism?

How does Easter leap off the calendar and into our hearts?

Well, how did Easter happen for the women at the tomb? "Then they remembered his words!" It behooves us to ask ourselves this Easter: How many of Jesus' words are portable for us? What words of Jesus can we take into the tombs of this world, of this community?

Are we truly allowing the words of Jesus to bore into our proud hearts? Here in America, we undeniably have a memory problem.

Well I know that April Fool's Day is just 5 days away, and I also am very well aware of the fact that April the 15th is only 2 weeks away from this coming Friday, and believe me, that is no April Fool's Day story or prank! And we all know what happens, or what is supposed to happen on April 15th. All of our Federal Tax Returns are to be filed, and any remain monies that we may owe to "Uncle Sam" must be coughed up by every one of us on that day!

This reality calls to mind for me an old cliché in which someone once said, "The only two things you can be absolutely sure of in this life are taxes and death!"

Well, I am certain that taxes are an ongoing reality in most everyone's life. But death, not so much so! Not when I remember those all-powerful words of the Risen Lord who still tells me today: "I am the Resurrection and the Life! Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die!"

I don't why is that IRS agents are still, what we sometimes call "a hard time" today. There are all kinds of safeguards now built into the system, so that they can no longer up the tax bills to feather their own nests and to give themselves and illegal bonus! That's the way in was in the Roman Empire in that first New Testament era!"

It seems that lawyers, often today, are all too often also the unjust brunt of so many jokes in our society today; a favorite category of professionals to be picked on by those late night television hosts like: Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon and Seth Meyers.

All this talk of taxes and death reminds me of a little story I heard the other day. It seems that this old preacher was dying. He sent a message for his IRS agent and his lawyer (both of whom were church members of his congregation) to come to his home. When they arrived they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled and stared at the ceiling. For a time, no one said anything. Both the IRS agent and Lawyer were touched and flattered that their old and beloved pastor would ask them to be with him during his final hours.

They were also puzzled because their pastor had never given either one of them even the slightest indication that he particularly liked either one of them. Finally, after sitting, one on each side of the old preacher's death bed, holding his hands, for over an hour, the lawyer, who by trade loved to ask important and penetrating questions asked the good reverend: "Pastor, why did you ask for the two of us to come to your house today?" The old pastor mustered up some strength, and then said, weakly, "Jesus died between two thieves, and that's how I want to go too!"

Well, friends, yes Jesus died between two thieves, but in the good news of his death and resurrection, salvation is even possible for members of the bar and agents of the Internal Revenue Service.

Then they remembered his words. Maybe I'm missing something in the story today. But isn't this how Easter happens for these women? Isn't this how resurrection becomes real for them? Jesus' words come alive in their hearts in the context of a tomb. You are welcome to try to prove or disprove Easter with a test tube. But to tell you the truth, I'm not sure your findings will matter that much one way or the other.

Resurrection happens in our lives when God the Holy Spirit cultivates within us a healthy Christian memory: that is, when we remember his words. Yes, Easter first happened 2,000 years ago, but how does it happen today? When we remember his words! Amen