

Beyond A Reasonable Doubt

St. Mark Lutheran
Three Easter Services

Pastor Ken Welsh
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Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightening, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." Gospel of Matthew 28: 1-10

In the year 2006, a great Christian scholar by the name of Jaroslav (Yah/ro/slav) Pelikan died. He is well remembered for many things, among them a quote of his that appeared in a Yale University newsletter near the end of his life. Dr. Pelikan said, "If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. And if Christ is not-nothing else matters."

There is no historical claim more important than the one passed down for many centuries through the church, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. It is the foundation upon which the Christian faith is built. It is a teaching that affects the life of every person who has ever lived or ever will live. It is a teaching that affects the life of every person here today. The Apostle John reveals in John 5:29: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out-those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

I was blessed during our recent vacation to read a book loaned to me by Don Heuer of our congregation. It is called Jesus on Trial by David Limbaugh. I would recommend that you read this book. It is on sale at www.amazon.com. It is one of the best books I have ever read, and it will help equip you to answer questions and to share the faith. Although Limbaugh used to be a skeptic himself, he goes on to explain in clear terms the arguments, evidence, and Biblical passages that led him to embrace Jesus Christ as his Savior.

David Limbaugh is a lawyer, among other things, and he is one who has used his training in the legal profession to help him in his search for the truth. In the legal profession the term "beyond a reasonable doubt" is often used as a standard of truth that must be met. On the basis of his research, Limbaugh believes that there is an enormous amount of evidence that shows, well beyond a reasonable doubt, that the Bible is the inspired word of God, that God entered this world in human form with the birth of his Son Jesus Christ, that this Jesus led a

sinless life, and that he was crucified, died, and was resurrected.” Once a skeptic, he now believes all these things, and urges all who hear or read about these things to believe them as well.

Today, let us look at just a part of the tremendous reservoir of evidence that supports the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Limbaugh listed nine main points of support and I am going to share five of those with you today. Please try to remember these five points because God may give you an opportunity to share them with someone in the future.

1. **The tomb was empty.** The New Testament books are filled with citations verifying the empty tomb. Even unbelieving Jews verified it when some of them made up the ridiculous story, without one detail to support it, that the disciples had stolen the body! Thus, they verified that the tomb was empty.
- 2) **There were a great number of witnesses.** We are told in 1 Corinthians that Jesus showed himself on one occasion to more than five hundred people. In the forty days following his crucifixion, he made at least twelve resurrection appearances. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus was born four years after Jesus was crucified. In his historical account titled Jewish Antiquities, he referred twice to Jesus. He reported that Jesus’ followers insisted that they had seen Jesus alive after he was crucified on a cross. Josephus even wrote that Jesus was perhaps the Messiah.
- 3) **There was a huge change in the lives of the disciples.** Pastor Mark plans to explain this in his message titled “Resurrection Evidence” next Sunday, so I am not going to say anything more about this. I hope you can be here to hear it.
- 4) **The conversion of Paul**, formerly an enemy of Christianity, Paul revealed he had an encounter with the risen Christ on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. There is no other reasonable explanation for such a dramatic change in his life. From a worldly standpoint, he gave up a lot, to live for the One he had tried to destroy. There are more books in the Bible written by Paul than anyone else.
- 5) **The message that Jesus was resurrected from the dead enabled the church to survive and to spread rapidly.** The resurrection message was central to the teaching of the early church, especially in Jerusalem, where Jesus had been both crucified and buried. Without it, the Christian faith would have been quickly wiped out. There was no reason to rally around a dead Messiah, but Jesus was alive and that changed everything.

Matthew relates that after the Sabbath and on the first day of the week the women went to the tomb. It was a day I’m sure they never forgot. They met an angel of the Lord there. The angel said, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, but he is risen, as he said. Come see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead...”

What the angel said to the women on the first day of the week, is similar to what our Lord says to every Christian today. His words are quoted in the St. Mark Mission Statement printed in your service folder: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (Matt. 28:19)

Jesus is counting on the people in his church to be his witnesses. He says, “He who confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father who is in heaven...”

Sometimes we are hesitant to do this. I believe that is, in part, because people don’t really understand what witnessing is. Witnessing is simply telling someone in some way about Jesus Christ. We are not responsible for the results. But believers are responsible for sharing the good news. It can be done in so many ways. It can be done by inviting someone to your church where they hear the good news. It can be in a discussion where you ask what they believe about God and share what you believe or a personal testimony. It can be in a Christian pamphlet or book that you give someone to read. One of my best teachers on witnessing taught me a principle I have never forgotten: “Successful witnessing is sharing Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God.” We don’t convert people; the Holy Spirit does. Leave the results to God.

David Limbaugh could tell you something about that. Years after he graduated from law school, he was at a reunion with some of his classmates, and he made the statement that he just couldn’t buy into Christianity. A man named Steve Springer stated that he did, and he then retrieved his Bible and shared some reasons why. Limbaugh didn’t leave that home a Christian that night, but from that point forward he had a great interest in finding out whether what his classmate said was right. Years later he would tell his classmate that his words that night planted the seeds that led to David Limbaugh coming to believe in Jesus Christ.

Our text says that the women departed from the tomb with great joy. There is a great joy in sharing the good news about Jesus; God blesses and strengthens you through it. Many would tell you that they have experienced great joy because someone cared enough about them to tell them about Christ. Finally, the Holy Scriptures tell us, the greatest joy for the believers in Christ is yet to come. For Jesus is quoted in John 11:25 as saying, to Martha “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies...” And he rose from the grave to prove it! Amen.

