

“PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION”

John 20:19-31; Psalm 133; Acts 4:32-35

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A disturbing report hit the news recently. In spite of growing interest in spirituality, the results of a new study indicate that Americans have grown less religious in the last twenty years. According to this study, there has been a 10% drop in the number of people who call themselves Christians and an increase in all 50 states among those who are not aligned with any faith. Most concerning to me is that the number of people who identify themselves as agnostics or atheists has almost doubled in the past 20 years, from 8.2% in 1990 to 15% today.(1)

Here at Church of the Saviour, we had a record crowd on Easter, with nearly 1,200 people attending one of our four Sunday services. Easter is the most important day on the Christian calendar. At new member classes, one of the first things I say is that our faith is based on the Easter story. Without the resurrection of Jesus, Christianity is a religion of moral values and high ideals. It is the resurrection of Jesus that proclaims that a whole new age has begun, and that we can live a new life, a victorious life with God at the center. Yet not everyone is able to accept the Easter story. Not everyone is able to swallow the idea that God did something new and unprecedented on that first Easter morning.

The first thing I want to say today is that **doubt is not new!** Difficulty in believing, in trusting the message of the Gospel goes all the way back to the first century. In Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Christ meets the disciples in Galilee, at the place where they live and work. Matthew tells us that “*When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*”(28:17) In John’s Gospel, apostolic doubt is personified in the man we call “Doubting Thomas,” who would not believe until he had experienced the resurrected Christ in his own life. Doubt is not new. I wonder if part of the reason that the number of atheists and agnostics being reported is so much higher than 20 years ago is simply because it is more accepted these days to state that you really don’t believe. A generation ago it was not politically correct to be a doubter or an unbeliever. Now it is almost in vogue.

Some have turned their backs on religious faith. We are told that in our area 10% of the people have no interest in religion whatsoever. But what about those who are open to hearing the Gospel, but are not sure about their beliefs? That may include many who are sitting in church! How can we proclaim the resurrection story in such a way that people will understand the message and come to faith?

I am convinced that we will not be very successful if we try to “prove” that Jesus rose from the dead. We live in a scientific age, and to try to explain how life came to a corpse, clearly dead and buried, is beyond the ability of the biblical witness. I have titled this sermon, “Proof of the Resurrection.” Yet I can offer no concrete, physical evidence that Jesus rose from

the dead. It does not bother me that I cannot produce physical evidence for the resurrection, however. To me, the proof of the resurrection lies in the transformed lives of the disciples.

The Bible tells us that on Good Friday the disciples were utterly devastated. Anyone who has kept vigil and watched a loved one take his or her last breath knows what an emotionally draining experience that can be. That was the experience of the faithful women disciples. The men had already deserted him and fled following Judas' betrayal and Jesus' arrest.⁽²⁾ Nothing that happened on Good Friday would have caused the disciples to come back together, to begin preaching and teaching and ultimately give their lives for the Gospel message. Only the resurrected presence of Jesus could enable that to happen. Only the power and presence of Christ could cause this frightened band of Jewish nobodies to lead a movement that would eventually become one of the world's major religions, with millions and millions of followers down through the ages. Yes, to me, the proof of the resurrection lies not in the argument for the resuscitation of Jesus' physical body, which I believe, but in the presence and power of Jesus' influence in the lives of the disciples.

One of our core beliefs is that the church is the continuing presence of Jesus Christ in the world today. For me, the real "proof" of the resurrection story is the amazing witness of the early church. Here again these words from Acts 4: *"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."*(32, 34-35) Upon hearing this story, a skeptic commented, "That sounds like communism to me: 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.'" Indeed, there is a good deal of that kind of thinking in this story. But I would remind you that communism is a political and economic system that has to be enforced by government action. The activity of the early church was totally spontaneous; motivated not by political agenda but by religious conviction.

This report of the early Christian community is simply astounding. Here are believers gathered in Jerusalem, availing themselves of the apostles' teaching, hearing day-by-day the words of those who had known Jesus best. Clearly they are a people transformed by what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead. The early church was not a place where some were in need, while others pondered where to invest their excess funds. It was a place where everyone was willing to sacrifice for the well-being of others. Here was a place where unity was born of shared experience. It was a taste of heaven on earth.

Sadly, this experience didn't last long. In the next chapter of Acts folks start taking advantage of these social arrangements. In the letters of Paul we find the Apostle constantly trying to deal with divisions of class, beliefs, and heritage in the churches he founded.

So do we dismiss this episode in church history as impossible idealism and join with the skeptics in throwing out the baby with the bath water? Do we despair over the persistent selfishness that plagues us and ruins every attempt at unity and wholeness? Or do we reflect upon the fact that at its best the church has provided light and life to the world for 2,000 years? That record of faithfulness tells me that the resurrection is true, and inspires me to follow that column of pilgrims who have allowed the resurrected Christ to transform their hearts and lives, making a difference for people and cultures and civilizations down through the centuries.

My point this morning is simply this: **Let the witness of the early church instruct and**

inspire your life today! If you want “proof” of the resurrection, live like the early disciples lived in those days after Easter and see what happens! You’ll be amazed! You’ll be transformed!

Those early Christians knew about death. It was just as hard for them to believe as it is for us that someone could rise to new life after being dead for three days. But this central truth is crucial, the truth that God is more powerful than death and is actively bringing new life to our world. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was recently asked if he ever doubted his work to end apartheid in South Africa would succeed. He answered, “No, because it was of God.” Then he added with a smile, “But I am so very thankful that I lived to see it happen.”(3)

Our faith is grounded in hope, the hope that God will continue to transform our world and make all things new. This description of life in the early church also reminds us that discipleship calls into account how we use our possessions. We don’t ask you to sell your house and give the money to the church when you join Church of the Saviour! We don’t ask you to turn over your paycheck to the church office! We read the verse about none claiming private ownership of anything with amused interest, like that’s going to happen in our rugged, individualistic culture! But then we read the next line: “*There was not a needy person among them,*” (34a) and we get the point. Discipleship always entails how we handle our possessions. Many would like to separate the spiritual from the physical aspects of living, as if it were possible to be in relationship with God and not experience any impact on our belongings and possessions. Jesus put it bluntly: “*You cannot serve God and wealth.*”(Matthew 6:24) You have to decide if money is your God or if there is a higher power.

The world drives us, saying that we must always have more, that we can find personal peace through accumulation. The Gospel teaches us that life is not about getting, but about giving. Our faithfulness always will be measured by what we do with what we have. Are we using our “stuff” in a way pleasing to God, a way that shows compassion, a way that bespeaks our gratitude to God? We cannot escape these questions with the delusion that our possessions are ours to do with as we please. No, Easter reminds us that we are stewards of all we have, and stewards are judged by how they manage what has been entrusted to them.

In the early church, the goal was to insure that everyone had enough. Do any of us doubt that is how it will be in heaven — that all will have what they need and be satisfied? If we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, we are called to begin living like that now. In the early church, there was not a needy person among them. What about our community? What is God calling us to do with our possessions?

When I baptize a baby, I always meet with the parents to review the vows. I try to remind these parents that as they are caring for their child’s spiritual needs, they also have a responsibility to care for their child’s future physical needs. I remind them that they need to have a will. A will can provide for the child’s future in the unlikely event that something happens to the parents. Caring for our loved ones is paramount in our thinking when it comes to our wills. My friends, we also need to care for the things of God. If God has been part of your life during your earthly existence, then I am unapologetic in asking you to remember the church in your will, that there will be resources to continue to teach the values that are important in every age. Discipleship entails how we use our possessions. Is God’s will part of your will?

Finally, people became convinced of the resurrection as they observed the unity of spirit in the early church. The book of Acts tells us that “*the whole group of those who believed were*

of one heart and soul.” (4:32) Anyone who has been around the church very long knows that we don’t all agree on everything. I have likened our church to a large umbrella, where we embrace a variety of opinions and beliefs. Anytime you get two Christians together, there will be at least three opinions! Yet there is tremendous strength in numbers, and when we focus on Jesus, great things can happen. In the early church being a community trumped being individuals. They were determined, not to let petty opinions or selfishness divide them. We know that there were disagreements among the apostles. Peter and Paul certainly were not always of one mind. But beneath this was a determination to seek and follow the will of God, rather than to have an individual’s will triumph at the cost of unity. In the early church, those who believed were of “*one heart and soul.*” Are we? Are we able to keep the main thing the main thing?

What do you say to someone who is struggling with the faith? (Maybe the someone is you!) I cannot offer concrete, physical proof for the resurrection, but I can point to a movement that started with a disillusioned group of folks and became the most powerful force for good that the world has ever known. I can show you an early church where they were of one heart and soul, and there was not a needy person among them. I can show you Church of the Saviour, where we are building a Habitat House, that we have already fully funded. I can tell you about an appeal for toys for the flood-victim children of Iowa that resulted in appliance boxes abounding with toys. I can tell you about a man who came into my office this past week and said, “Church of the Saviour is the best kept secret in the Heights area. How can I help get the word out?”

That, my friends, is **proof of the resurrection**: God’s people at work, transformed and transforming! May the power of the risen Christ be evident to us, and may we allow him to transform our hearts and lives today!

Prayer: Dear God, we live in a world of doubt and unbelief. Help us to focus our eyes on the resurrected Christ as he reveals himself through the witness of the church, even of this church as lives continue to be transformed. May each of us open our hearts to him today! Amen.

Notes:

1. *Christian Century*. Vol. 126. No. 7., p. 15.
2. Mark 14:50
3. Farris, Lawrence W. “Because of the Resurrection.” *The Clergy Journal*. Jan/Feb., 2009., p. 28.