

Title: Christ is risen! But how can we begin to believe it?

Subtitle: Faith in the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, is grounded in the testimony of reliable witnesses.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/qBKJ7LwXYPI>

I always find it very challenging to give an Easter sermon. One apparent reason for this is that faith in the resurrection of Jesus never comes easily. It is a concept that is far beyond the scope of human reasoning, and therefore when we read the Gospel accounts, we find that faith never came naturally to any of our Lord's disciples.

The disciples did not expect the resurrection. It was totally outside their frame of reference, and this was true even though Jesus had told them repeatedly that "***he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.***"¹

And when the women in our Gospel story today tell the eleven and other disciples what they had seen and heard, "***their words seemed like idle tales.***"² And because they didn't believe it, each of them had to go through a process of being convinced either by Jesus himself or by the overwhelming testimonies of others who had seen him.

The reason I want to talk about the disciple's disbelief today is that we are just like them. We can hear the message Jesus proclaimed. We can witness the miracles that he performs in other people's lives. But when it comes to living amid difficult times—times of loss—the times of mourning—times of perplexity and pandemic, it can be oh so very hard to believe

¹ Matthew 16:21-22, Luke 9:22, Matthew 17:22-23

² Luke 24:11

that Christ has overcome every negative thing this world could throw at him, including death itself.

The disciples who first witnessed the resurrection were no different from us. They were “*slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken,*”³ So, if this is true, how do we find a personal faith that imparts confidence and hope? For most, it starts by grappling with the testimony of those first reliable witnesses.

My Personal Story:

It was the story of Christ’s apostles who laid down their lives in witness to the resurrection that grabbed my attention as a college student. In those early years, I began to wonder how I could find meaning in a world that seemed so messed up. I had been raised in the Church, where I formally made a confession of faith each time the Nicene Creed was recited. But for me, it was an intellectual assent to what the Church taught. To me, it was a vague hope or superstition. I wanted it to be true, but I didn’t know with assurance that it was true. So, I began to ask questions. Questions like, how could the early apostles give up their lives as martyrs if they made this whole thing up? What did they see that I didn’t see? I am convinced that God was working on my heart as I look back. I remember praying and making a personal commitment that if the Lord would show me the truth of these things, then I would believe and follow him. Which, by the way, is why I am here today.

Following the Lord has never been an easy journey. After the crucifixion, the followers of Jesus were devastated and fearful. They fled the scene when he was arrested. They went into hiding, thinking that they might be next on the hit list. Each

³ Luke 24:25

of the four Gospels testifies to the depth of their distress at how they were distraught by having their beloved leader taken from them, tried, beaten, publicly stripped, and nailed to a cross. They couldn't imagine how God could possibly allow such a thing to happen to someone "***who had gone about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.***"⁴ Consequently, any thought of resurrection was the furthest thing from their minds.

These disciples were not theorists or theologians. Nor were they philosophers. For example, Matthew was a tax collector. Then there was Philip, a person who knew how to add and subtract. Then there was Mark, who was young and impressionable. Another was Thomas, famous for his outspoken doubt. Others were fisherfolk like Peter, James, John, and Andrew, all of whom were regarded as uneducated and part of the working class.⁵ Not many of them were wise according to the standards of this world. They were not the kind of people who sat around and pondered how they would like to see the world work.

We all can relate to their humanness as they were in a state of doubt and despair until they saw Jesus in his resurrected body appear before them. When he first appeared, "they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit."⁶ So Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."⁷ They ate and drank with him. His life was so real and concrete that it made a life-changing impact. In a matter of 50 days, their lives were transformed from a

⁴ Acts 10:38

⁵ Acts 4:13

⁶ Luke 24:37

⁷ Luke 24:38-39

fearful, cowering bunch to a group that dared to boldly proclaim the good news of the resurrection to crowds numbering in the 1000s. They declared their faith before kings and rulers and even in the prisons where they were often thrown. Without flinching, they proclaimed, ***“This Jesus, who was crucified, God has raised from death, and has made him both Lord and Christ.”***⁸ These chosen witnesses were so thoroughly assured of the fact of his rising again that they not only testified to it but risked and sacrificed their lives to tell others what they had seen and heard.

Some became human torches. Some were fed to lions. Some were torn limb from limb. Some were beheaded, and some were even crucified. And not one ever changed his or her mind about it.

- No matter what the cost.
- No matter what the threat.
- No matter what the consequences.

And in spite of these things, they boldly proclaimed that ***“...Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was raised to life.”*** And therefore, ***“...repentance and the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations.”*** (Lk 24:47).

Faith in the risen Christ changes everything. Because of it, life has meaning and significance, not just for this life but also for the life to come. Because of it, we can live not just for the present moment. We can make sacrifices that will make an impact on others for all eternity. There is life, eternal life in Jesus' name. ***Alleluia. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.***

⁸ Acts 2:26

The Rev. Stephen Becker; Easter Day, 2022, YrC, Luke 24:1-12, Acts 10:34-43; 1 Cor. 15:19-26