

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 1, Series C (Resurrection Day)
Sunday, April 21st, 2019

Sermon: Don't Seek the Living among the Dead

Text: Luke 24:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Focus: Jesus Christ rose bodily from the grave to conquer death for us.

Function: That they would believe in the historical resurrection of the Son of God.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "...Just as He is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true" (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Who's buried in Grant's tomb? That's an old riddle in the United States. Do you know the answer? Who's buried in Grant's tomb... *[Pause for answers]* The answer is... *nobody!* President Grant was laid to rest in a sarcophagus *above ground*. He's not buried at all!

Now here's a more important question: Who is buried in Jesus' tomb? *[Pause]* Again, the answer is *nobody* because Jesus rose from the dead! As the angels told the women at the tomb, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you..." (Luke 24:5b-6a, ESV).¹ For what the women found on that first Easter morning was not Jesus' corpse, but rather an empty tomb.

The tomb is still empty. Jesus *did* rise from the dead. What happened on that first Easter was not a **hallucination or a ghost**. According to N.T. Wright, "Everyone in the ancient world took it for granted that people sometimes had strange experiences involving encounters with the dead, particularly the recently dead... They had language for this, and it wasn't *resurrection*."²

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

² N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 58.

It wasn't a fairytale or legend that his disciples made up to comfort their grief over what happened on Good Friday.

No, Jesus *really* rose from the dead with a physical body that people could see and touch (cf. Luke 24:36-43; John 20:27). Jesus came back to life with flesh and blood, bone and breath. Yes, his resurrection body was *different* than his first body. After all, he could walk through locked doors and disappear suddenly (Luke 24:31; John 20:19). But he still had a body. "See my hands and feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39).

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, people have tried to deny Christ's resurrection on various grounds or unsupported claims. For example, the Jewish religious leaders bribed the soldiers who guarded Jesus' tomb, asking them to circulate a rumor that Jesus' **disciples stole his body** in the middle of the night (Matt. 28:11-15). Grave robbery was a common practice in the ancient world, but none of Jesus' disciples could have fought off a cadre of Roman soldiers—the best trained in the world at that time—especially when you consider that they were fishermen and tax collectors (among other professions), untrained in the art of war. It is completely implausible that the disciples could have fought off the guards *and* moved the heavy stone by themselves without being detected or caught themselves.

Others claim that Jesus' disciples went to the **wrong tomb** on Easter morning. That might sound convincing, but, if that were true, then sooner rather than later, they would have realized their error and gone to the right spot. After all, Jewish burial customs were extremely reverent, especially for a beloved martyr like Jesus.

Some critics claim that Jesus' disciples **made up the whole story** in order to convince people to believe Jesus' teachings after he was gone. However, if they made it up, they certainly

went about it the wrong way. For all four gospels agree that *women* were the first witnesses of the empty tomb and resurrected Christ. Perhaps that doesn't sound strange to us, but in the ancient world, whether we like it or not, women were not viewed as reliable witnesses. Their testimony did not even count in court. So if you were making up a story about Jesus rising from the dead, never in your right mind would you claim that *women* saw Jesus alive; you'd say it was the *men* who saw. But if Jesus really did rise from the dead, you would have to tell the inconvenient truth of what really happened: the women were the first to see and believe.

Furthermore, if Jesus hadn't risen from the dead, then why would the apostles endure persecution and, ultimately, execution, for the sake of the gospel? If Jesus hadn't risen from the dead and appeared to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, then how would that zealous hater of Christians and the Church convert to the cause and become the greatest missionary the world has ever known? Nobody knowingly and willingly dies for a lie. When persecution came, you'd retract your story and get on with your life. But all of the apostles except John died horrible martyrs' deaths. John likely died in exile on Patmos, a prison island. But James was thrown off a roof. Peter was crucified upside down. Thomas was boiled alive in a cauldron of hot oil. Paul was beheaded. You don't stick out your neck for a fable. The only logical explanation is that the disciples themselves believed that they had seen Jesus alive again.

Doubters and skeptics have other objections to Jesus' resurrection, all of which can be answered and dealt with quite ably by Christians who believe the gospel narratives. Even the silly idea that Jesus didn't really die on the cross can be shot down simply enough: Roman soldiers were good at killing people, and they didn't leave the job unfinished (cf. John 19:33-36).

Nevertheless, no matter how many rational arguments I give you as evidence for Jesus' resurrection, you can still dismiss it out of hand were it not for *faith*. As I often like to say, you

cannot argue anybody into the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit must convince them by the power of the message of the Gospel (Rom. 10:17; John 6:44).

But if you don't believe in the resurrection, then why are you here? Do you really think that Easter is all about rabbits and eggs and a pagan celebration of fertility? If so, you are greatly mistaken. For the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the entire basis for our faith. As St. Paul writes in our epistle, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:9). If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we've all been duped, and we can't trust anything Jesus said. For he himself predicted on at least three occasions that he would be betrayed, crucified, and rise from the dead. Without resurrection victory, Christ is not vindicated, and we are left in doubt. It does no good to remake him as a kind teacher if he cannot be trusted. For "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor. 15:14). Without the death and resurrection of the Son of God, Christianity holds no water and falls apart.

"But *in fact* Christ *has* been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). Again, the word of the angels: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you... that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise" (Luke 24:5b-7). The tomb is empty, and Jesus is alive! The victory is won! The power of death is undone! In fact, Jesus died on the cross to save you from your sins. And, indeed, he rose again to give you eternal life. "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). This is our Christian hope: not a sappy, sentimental fairytale, but the earth-shattering, greatest and most momentous event in all of human history. Don't seek the living among the dead. "He is not

here, but has risen.” Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.