

## “Testimony to the Resurrection”

Acts 4:32-35 • Psalm 133 • 1 John 1:1-2:2 • John 20:19-31

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Second Sunday of Easter

Our scripture lessons for this second Sunday of Easter point in several different directions. I had a difficult time determining which direction to go this week, so I'm going to briefly outline three distinct themes. One comes from the reading in the book of Acts, which describes the life of the first church, the church in Jerusalem, during some of its earliest years: “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.” This is a remarkable description of the true *community* of those earliest Christians, a community that has rarely been replicated ever since. If you keep reading you will hear about a man named Barnabas, a Jew who became a Christian, from the island of Cyprus, who “sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.” We get a glimpse of the *economic* life of these early Christians, at how they managed their money. A distinguishing characteristic of these early Christians was that they *shared* their wealth with one another. “There was not a needy person among them.” Their lives were marked by a spirit of *generosity* and *genuine concern for the well-being of their fellow Christians*. When we read the letters of Paul, we learn that when he was traveling around the Mediterranean world spreading the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, one year he took up a collection to benefit the Christians back in Jerusalem. We get some pretty strong clues that many of the Christians in and around Jerusalem were considerably less well-off than most other Christians. Poverty seems to have been fairly *localized* in one region, and the more well-off Christians gave willingly and generously to help their sisters and brothers who were less fortunate, giving even to people they had never met before, even to people from a different ethnic heritage than they were. When Paul describes the ideal Christian life, he lifts up nine characteristics of a mature Christian, a Christian who fully demonstrates the fruits of the Holy Spirit working in their life. *Generosity* is one of those nine characteristics. Those of us who claim to follow Jesus would do well to follow the example of the early Christians, generously sharing with our neighbors in need, until a day comes when these words could also be said of us: “there was not a needy person among them.”

A second theme from today's readings comes from the first letter of John and has to do with the continuing reality of our own sinfulness, even *after* we have devoted ourselves to the Christian life. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Such a simple statement, and yet how incredibly *true* it is. Most of us don't like to admit that we really do sin, that we say or do things that fail to demonstrate the love and justice of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we get stuck in our own pride, or hubris, or flat-out denial. Sometimes we try to justify things that really can't be justified. “If

we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” As Christians, we have to be willing to take an honest self-assessment of our words and our deeds, *in light of everything* that Jesus teaches us. Whenever we find something in ourselves that does not reflect our identity in Christ, we need to *do something about it*. One step is *confession*. We take comfort in these words: “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” We bank on that promise week after week, when we confess our sins here in worship, and hopefully that isn’t just a rote activity for you. Hearing of God’s forgiveness is pretty meaningless if we’re not making any kind of sincere effort to acknowledge the things we do that are wrong. But we need to more than just *confess*. If our sin has hurt somebody, or a group of people, we also need to acknowledge that sin to *them*, owning up to what we have done and the harm that it has caused, apologizing and doing what we can to make amends. The first, critical piece is a good self-examination in light of the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. In what ways do we fall short of being the people God wants us to be? “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” Are we willing and able to see our *own* sin, or just the sins of others? Is God’s word *truly* in us? Or are we just deceiving ourselves?

A third theme from today’s readings comes from the Gospel story about the difficulty that Thomas had believing the testimony of his friends about the resurrection of Jesus. “The other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’” He’s earned a nickname through the centuries; people call him “doubting Thomas,” and that’s not a compliment. But it’s important to note that in this passage Jesus does not rebuke him for his lack of faith, as Jesus does to other people on other occasions. Jesus does say, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” which is often interpreted as a criticism of Thomas, but I’m inclined to think that line is more directed at all of *us* than it was to Thomas. Thomas had the benefit of seeing the risen Christ in the flesh. We don’t. We just have to rely on the testimony of countless people who have gone before us, including the four Gospel writers. For some people, believing comes easily; for others, it doesn’t come easily at all. For those people, Thomas can be something of a role model. He was a skeptic. He knows that people make all sorts of claims, many of which are exaggerated or untrue. He didn’t want to believe in something that couldn’t be tested or proven. But once he was presented with the evidence, he very quickly acknowledged the truth of what he was experiencing, addressing Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” We’re most likely never going to have the opportunity to see Jesus in the flesh the way Thomas did, but we can rest assured knowing that he didn’t come to faith in Jesus on the basis of flimsy evidence. What he saw *changed* him. He was a skeptic – and he came to believe. That wasn’t *recklessness* on his part. If you’re a skeptic, you can use *his* experience of Jesus and *his* testimony to help *you* come to believe.

This story about Thomas is one of a number of stories from the New Testament about people who encountered Jesus in the flesh after the surprise of the empty tomb. There are stories about these resurrection appearances, or references to them, in all four Gospels, the book of Acts, and in the letters of Paul. They share some important similarities, but there are also some significant differences. It begins on that Easter morn: how many women arrive at the tomb? John’s Gospel suggests just one. Matthew’s Gospel names two. Mark’s Gospel specifies three. Luke’s Gospel indicates at least five. How many angels did the women see at the tomb? Matthew and Mark say one; Luke and John say two. Who did the women go tell? In John, it’s Simon Peter and the beloved disciple; in Luke, it’s “the eleven and all the rest;” in Mark, they don’t tell *anybody*, at least, not at first. What happened next? Luke says that later that day, Jesus took a long walk with two disciples who were going to a village called Emmaus, and

that he also appeared to Simon Peter somewhere in the vicinity of Jerusalem. John says that most of the apostles – but not Thomas – were together in a locked room, in or near Jerusalem, when Jesus appeared to all of them. Mark says Jesus appeared to *all* the apostles while they were having a meal. Matthew says the apostles saw Jesus on a mountaintop in Galilee. Paul says that Jesus appeared first to Simon Peter, then to the group of apostles, and then “he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time” (1 Cor 15:5-7), and after that to James. John says that Jesus later appeared to seven of the disciples one morning after they had been fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Luke sums it all up by saying that “after his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father.” (Acts 1:3) This is all very confusing. Did the disciples go back to Galilee, or did they stay in Jerusalem? Who, exactly, saw Jesus, and in what order? Why does it look like some of these details can’t be reconciled – like the fact that John explicitly says that Thomas did *not* see Jesus on the day of the resurrection, while other accounts sure sound like he *did*? How do we make *sense* of all this? These are the kind of questions that used to really bother me. How can we believe in Christ’s resurrection if the testimony about it does not agree?

It’s important to remember that several of these accounts were not written by eyewitnesses. Mark, Luke, and Paul were not there on Easter day; all three of them became Christians much later on. They wrote down teachings and stories about Jesus that they had heard from other Christians before them. It’s quite possible that some factual errors may have crept into some of these accounts. It’s also quite likely that the disciples’ memories weren’t perfect. If you ask two people about an event that they were both at twenty years ago, you’re undoubtedly going to find some details that do not seem to match.

But there is also remarkable *agreement* about the basic contours of the story. All the accounts agree that Jesus was bodily raised from dead. All the accounts agree that various people saw him over the course of that first Easter day. Those appearances led to feelings of awe, fear, and disbelief among the followers of Jesus at first, until they reached a point when they could confidently and boldly proclaim, “We have seen the Lord!” And all the accounts agree that there were a *series* of appearances, both to individual people and to whole groups. This was both a *communal* experience, and also a deeply *personal* one. Just like the church. We worship in *community*, but our faith is deeply *personal*.

I don’t think it matters that the accounts do not completely agree. In fact, I think this gives them more *credence*. If someone wanted to *fabricate* this story out of thin air, don’t you think they would have gone to a little more effort to make sure that their stories matched each other in many of these details? I think these accounts are different because there’s some *truth* to *all* of them. It’s impossible for us to sort out the specific sequence of events at this point, but Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul all wrote down what they believed was an *accurate* version of the events. The church, in its wisdom, decided to preserve *all* these different accounts. We get several different windows through which to view the Easter story. It’s possible that *none* of them got it *completely* right. But I also believe that they *all* got it right, when it comes to what *really* matters, that Christ not only was raised from the dead, but that he also *appeared*, in bodily form and in a variety of different circumstances, to his followers after his resurrection, with the result that they were utterly *convinced* that this really was *real*.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Thanks be to God!

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