

The Resurrection? Prove It!

April 17, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Luke 24:1-12

24:1 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " 8 Then they remembered his words.

9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12 Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

When Easter rolls around again, I begin to wonder, "What am I going to say this year that is different than all the other Easter sermons I have preached?" After all, I started preaching back in 1987 as the pastor of a two-point charge, Delaware Water Gap and Poplar Valley. That very first Easter sunrise service we held up on the Appalachian trail. It was a beautiful scene where I had a little lake as the background while I preached. About midway through the sermon I heard the congregation give a collective intake of breath and whispers of awe. At first I thought, I never expected a reaction like that to my Easter sermon. And then someone pointed behind me, and there at the edge of the little lake was a beautiful deer, head bent to the water, taking a morning drink in the sunrise. It dawned on me what people were whispering about and making gestures of awe about – and it wasn't me or my sermon. So much for the humility of a young preacher.

I have preached approximately 35 Easter sermons and 35 separate Easter sunrise sermons since then. After 70 sermons, what else is there to say about Easter? What is it one could say that would generate an intake of breath and whispers of awe – not at the cleverness of the preacher – but at the beauty, the grace, the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, once crucified but now risen from the dead?

After all, there are still so many people who don't think Jesus' resurrection of the dead has any significance for their lives today. And there are even more who do not believe in resurrection, period. One can hardly blame a person for doubting the resurrection. Belief in the resurrection takes a lot of faith. First, you have to believe there is a God, and that he is Almighty. Second, you have to believe that God came in the flesh in Jesus Christ. Third, you have to believe in the supernatural; that is, that miracles actually can and do happen. Fourth, you have to believe that a person could bodily rise from the dead – not just be resuscitated so that you would end up dying again someday, but bona fide resurrected in a body that is imperishable and incorruptible. That's a pretty tall order. There are understandably many skeptics today, just as there were in Jesus' day.

Our Scripture reading today speaks about two men dressed in clothes that gleamed like lightning telling a group of women that Jesus was risen from the dead. For those women this was irrefutable proof. When you have angels talk to you and a whole group experiences the same thing at the same time, then you know something extraordinary has happened. So they ran to tell the other disciples. The women had been at the tomb to finish preparing Jesus' body for burial, while the men were hiding out hoping that the authorities would not find them and arrest them too. The women were the first witnesses of the resurrected Lord. But the men would not believe them. You see, in that day and for that culture, women were not considered to be credible witnesses. That God had chosen women to be the first witnesses of the resurrection was saying something. Anyone else of that time, if they wanted people to believe what they said was true, would not have relied on the women to tell the story. Such was the power and grace of God!

According to the gospel of Luke, only Peter was curious enough to want to go check things out for himself. He didn't see the two angels. All he saw was an empty tomb with the strips of linen that had been wrapped around Jesus' body just lying there, like a cocoon that no longer has anything inside of it. If someone had decided to rob Jesus' body from the tomb, they would not have stripped the body of the linen and left it lying there. Peter left the empty tomb, shaking his head in bewilderment over what had happened. Only later would he and the other disciples realize that Jesus had meant what he said when he had prophesied about rising again from the dead (Luke 18:31-34).

Thus, we should not belittle those who doubt, even those who call themselves atheist or agnostic, because there were those who did not believe even at the time Jesus' resurrection happened. Actually, after doing some reading lately by author and theologian, Timothy Keller, I tend to agree that it takes more of a leap of faith to be an atheist or agnostic than it does to be a follower of Christ. After all, you can't go through this life without believing in something. Everyone here believed the sun would rise today, and that the pew (or chair) you are sitting on right now would be strong enough to support your weight. Otherwise, you would not have trusted the seat enough to sit down on it.

You see, many people say they refuse to believe in something unless they have irrefutable proof. You want them to believe in the resurrection? Then they will want you to prove it. The problem with that approach is that there are just some things that cannot be proven, at least not with an iron-clad argument, and that you have to just have faith that it is true because you can't find an iron-clad argument against it either.

Even the arguments that atheists and agnostics have for NOT believing in God do not have irrefutable arguments. Who is to say that even if the world did start with a Big Bang, that there was not One who always existed to make it happen. For those who argue that there is no absolute moral standard, such as the Ten Commandments, cannot prove why they believe some things are wrong, like killing innocent people, or why others should be obligated to agree to their particular standard of moral values.

The problem for those who want to prove that something is true or not, is that their arguments are based on confirming what they believe are facts rather than trusting in a relationship.

Erwin McManus tells of a time when an atheist challenged him in a debate.

He was angry at God for the hypocrisy he experienced growing up in church. ...[He] ...did not allow anyone else the opportunity to join the conversation. Each time [McManus] answered his question, he would come at [him] with another; without stopping to reflect.

...[McManus sensed] his questions were disingenuous. His questions were not for the purpose of discovery, but to prove his intellectual superiority. ...[McManus] asked him to pause, [saying] "I will answer one more question. ...if it is the question that keeps you from trusting God with your life." [McManus] challenged him ...that if [he] answered the question well, he would acknowledge his need for God and open his soul to the invitation of Jesus.

There passed what seemed an eternity of silence. The man seemed to find himself at an unexpected crossroad. He was loaded with questions that had kept him from faith, but unprepared to voice the one question that would allow him to believe. He finally broke the silence by asking [McManus] for a raincheck. He said that question was too important to ask on such short notice. He asked if he could think about it for a week and return the next week to continue the conversation.¹

McManus agreed but the man never did come back. One can argue about God all day and never really get anywhere. Don't get me wrong. There are people who have written very persuasive arguments for the existence of God, including Lee Strobel, Timothy Keller, and Blaise Pascal, to name only a few. But ultimately, you cannot argue someone into the kingdom of God. You need to trust and you need to trust that a relationship is worth developing.

This is why Jesus made an appearance to the disciple Thomas, sometimes referred to as doubting Thomas, after Jesus was risen from the dead. The other disciples tried to

¹ Erwin McManus, *The Genius of Jesus*, pp. 160-161.

argue with Thomas that they had seen Jesus risen from the dead. Thomas would not believe until he saw it for himself. So, Jesus made an appearance to Thomas, specifically so he could touch the scars of his nail wounds and the place where the soldier's spear had pierced him in the side. Only then did Thomas exclaim, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:24-29).

You see, in order to "prove" that Jesus is risen from the dead, you may need to experience Jesus for yourself. He does want to develop a relationship with you, person to person, which you can do, because he is risen from the dead. All you need to do is trust... and believe!