

“So That You May Know the Truth”

Reverend Bill Gause

Overbrook Presbyterian Church

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New Testament Reading: Luke 24:36-48

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.



Sermon: “So That You Will Know the Truth”

Two weeks ago we celebrated Easter! It was a glorious day! We had two services here on the church grounds that were joyful and moving and the weather simply could not have been better. But now it is two weeks later and so today, we celebrate... Easter. That’s right, Easter. You see Easter is more than just one day, it is a season. Which is fitting considering the magnitude of what has happened. Jesus has been raised! God has defeated the powers of sin and death! The Kingdom of God has come in glory! The church doesn’t just take one day to celebrate this. The church sets aside seven weeks to consider and ruminate on the amazing things that have happened, both at the resurrection and during the life and ministry of Jesus, and what that means for us. That’s actually a few days longer than the season of Lent that preceded Easter.

That’s because the time after Easter is just as important as the time before it. In fact, it is actually more important. But all too often we treat Easter Sunday as the end of the story, when in fact it is the beginning. It’s almost like we reflect on the betrayal and violence and injustice of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and think “Wow, that’s horrible, but it had to happen for our salvation.” And then Easter morning is just sort of a happy ending; a sorbet to cleanse the pallet of the bad taste left behind by the events of the previous week. “Jesus is risen! Whew! Glad that’s over!”

But the resurrection pushes us beyond ourselves and on towards the Kingdom of God. In the resurrection of Jesus, God claims victory over the powers and principalities of this world, establishes the reign of Jesus as Lord, and ushers in the Kingdom of God. And while that is something to be celebrated, after the dancing is over and the band has packed up to go home, we are gifted with a mission, and a calling.

The passage from Luke that we just read comes immediately after the story of Cleopas and his companion who encountered Jesus on their way home to Emmaus. When Jesus reveals himself they run back to Jerusalem, back to the place where the disciples were hiding in fear. So, while Cleopas and his friend are standing there, telling the disciples about what they’ve experienced, Jesus himself shows up in their midst. He’s just sort of ... there. You know when Cleopas was telling the tale some doubted. You know there were some who just couldn’t bring themselves to believe what they were hearing. But then BAM! There’s Jesus standing among them to prove that it’s all true.

Proof seems really important to Luke. In his account of the Easter story, Luke makes sure to include all the physical evidence that was recorded of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. It would have been easy for reader’s and hearers of Luke’s gospel to dismiss this as an idle tale. So Luke makes sure to identify the women who found the tomb empty, by name. And maybe

you could dismiss them as not being very reliable witnesses, but Luke tells us that Simon Peter, the first disciple, no less than he had seen and born witness to what the women claimed.

But even then, you could claim they were mistaken, or deluded with grief into seeing things that weren't there. So Luke reminds us that Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his companion. And if that's not good enough, he also appeared in front of the disciples who had been in hiding since Jesus' arrest. So many witnesses. But the persistent skeptic might also claim that who they saw was an imposter. Except that this man was no imposter. The wounds on his hands and feet showed him to be the one who was hung on the cross. But maybe he was an apparition; a ghost. And so Luke recounts the story of how he ate some food, something that demonstrated he was more than mere spirit, he was as solid as you or I, and hungry too.

Luke goes to great lengths to provide proof of the resurrection; the Jesus who was encountered on Easter Sunday was the same Jesus that had been crucified on Good Friday. The Easter experiences Luke describes were not spiritual or the result of attempts to deceive. They are God's decisive, unique, historical act of resurrection. And for Luke, it is important to establish that fact. And that is because for Luke, it is important to show the tremendous gap between the powers of this world and the power of God. The powers and principalities of this world are formidable, but they are nothing next to the power of God.

No less than famed cartoonist Gary Larson has argued the same thing. In one of Larson's Far Side cartoons, he depicts God as a contestant on a gameshow. Not surprisingly, God has over a thousand points, and God's opponent has zero. In a commentary on his work Larson wrote that "[He] was careful to... [make] sure that God was winning hands down. Even if [God's human opponent] had only ten points it would have meant that he beat God to the buzzer at least once..."¹

And that is the point of Luke's insistence on a bodily resurrection: to show that the worst that the powers and principalities of this world could muster against God was not enough. The powers and principalities of this world took their best shot and failed.

And the opponents arrayed against Jesus *were* powerful. Jesus was crucified by the mighty Roman Empire: the superpower of its day, that stood astride the known world like a Colossus. Yet Jesus proclaimed a greater power and called for loyalty to a higher Kingdom. Jesus was a Jewish reformer who taught that the greatest law is that you love God and one another, yet many Jews, including many of the authorities held fast to their traditions and resisted his reforms. They wouldn't even recognize his right to make those reforms. So they plotted against Jesus, rejected him as Messiah, and sought to crush his movement.

But more than that, the power of human sin, in all its cruelty and banality was on display for the world to see: in the betrayal of Jesus by a disciple, in the denial of Jesus by a friend, in the calls of the crowd to "crucify him!" and in the way his suffering on the cross became spectacle for the masses. And on Good Friday, Jesus died. Death: that which is certain above all other things; which holds no prejudice against good or evil but comes for every person in turn and which will one day come for you and I as well, laid claim to the Son of Man.

On Good Friday, when the earth shook, the sky grew dark, and Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"² The power of Rome, the power of Jewish tradition, the sin and evil of humanity, and death seemed to have won again. But on Easter morning, all the powers and principalities of this world were shown to be less than the power and might of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love. As Luke writes in Acts 2, "...God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power."³

That is the significance of Easter. That is the significance of the resurrection: that the powers of this world do not ultimately have the final say. God does. In the words of Revelation 11:15, "*The Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Messiah and he will reign forever and ever.*"

Luke begins his gospel by stating his purpose for writing it: “So that you may know the truth.”⁴ And that truth is this: That in Jesus of Nazareth, God broke into the world and defeated all of the powers by which we have been enslaved: sin, evil, fear, and death, and set us free for not just eternal life, but for meaningful life here and now.

Just as he did with Cleopas and his companion earlier on the road to Emmaus, Jesus takes the time to teach the disciples and explain all the things the scriptures said about him and what they meant. And then Jesus closes with this:

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

This is not the end of Jesus’ story, it is the beginning. The good news of God’s grace, mercy, and steadfast love is to be proclaimed to all the world, and it starts right here in Jerusalem. It starts right here, with you.

It is important for Luke that he be a witness to all that has happened; that he give voice to those who witnessed what happened that first Easter, that he remind us all that we too are to be witnesses to all that has happened and to what it means. You see, the good news of Easter is not meant to be only a personal revelation, a dose of good news for our own souls. It is to be shared, experienced, lived. And it is the responsibility of all who hear it to share it and to live it.

In his book *Christian Doctrine*, Shirley Guthrie writes

“The confession that Jesus is Lord does not mean that we can sit back with a sigh of relief and tell ourselves that everything is all right now. The powers of evil around us and within us have not yet admitted defeat. The risen Lord is still finishing the work he began, and to call him Lord means to throw ourselves into the battle with him.”⁵

That means loving God and our neighbors and our enemies; it means sharing what we have and working to make sure that everyone has enough to eat, and a safe place to live, and that there is justice and peace for all of God’s children. It means not allowing ourselves to become comfortable with peace in our own neighborhoods when there is violence in others. It means not turning away from prejudice and suffering just because it doesn’t affect us directly, day to day. It means living our lives in response to God’s goodness and grace and seeking to be God’s instruments for the purposes of God’s Kingdom, because Jesus is our Lord, and that’s what he said we must do.

“Jesus is risen!” But that’s not just a happy ending; it’s a call to a challenging, and hopeful new beginning.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Larson, Gary. *The Pre-history of the Far Side; a 10th Anniversary Exhibit*. London: Warner, 1990. 147. Print.

² Matthew 27:46, NRSV

³ Acts 2:22-24, NRSV

⁴ Luke 1:4, NRSV

⁵ Guthrie, Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, KY.: Westminster/J. Knox, 1994. 286. Print.