

Series: Give Up!

Sermon: Give Up Your Fear

Luke 24:1-12 (NIV)

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.

Sermon

From your day you are born till the day you die, you go through several distinct predictable stages. There are seven of them. We start out with spills. Then with school we get to drills. Followed by Thrills. Then come the bills, then the ills. You reach an age where there's pills. Followed by wills. Life is about change. Each generation that you live through has a different meaning for you. How many people in there 30's start thinking, Whoa, I'd better start a family. How many people in there 50's start thinking, “Whoa, I'd better start worrying about retirement?” I guess that's better than the 50's thinking, “Whoah, I'd better start a family.” Getting a little late on the ball there. Of course, I remember a woman who had never been married being interviewed on her 100 birthday. The reporter asked her, “Do you have any children?” and her response was, “Not yet.” Hope springs eternal. I can imagine what it will be like when I'm old, how I'll change over time. I asked someone “How do you know your reaching your golden years?” This was there response. Almost everything hurts. What doesn't hurt doesn't work anymore. It feels like the morning after the night before, and you haven't been anywhere yet. All the names in your little black book end in MD. You get winded playing chess. You look forward to a dull evening. You still chase women, but have forgotten why. You turn out the lights for economic, not romantic reasons. Your knees buckle and your belt wont. You sink your teeth into a steak and they stay there. A little old gray-haired lady tries to help you across the street. She's your wife. And my favorite, you try to straighten the wrinkles in your socks and you find you aren't wearing any. Life is about changes. We are on an ever shifting journey through life.

I saw a Gallup poll a while back that so many people believed in the Christmas story, but there was a little less who saw Easter as a credible event. And that continues to surprise me. We are an Easter people, not a Christmas people. Without Easter, Christmas would have no meaning. Without an Easter, it wouldn't have mattered if Christ was born in a stable with angels and shepherds and wise men. The power of Easter makes Christmas what it is. But there are sceptics out there. One person commented to me once, years ago, “Christianity - there's nothing in it. It's a sham.” There's nothing in it. It didn't happen. It could have been doctored up. It could have been fake. And I see their point. But we also hear of people who say, The Holocaust

never happened either. We never landed on the moon either. Conspiracy theories abound in just about anything, and they could also take a look at Easter, and say, no proof. No proof. On that first Easter morning the disciples came to the tomb of Jesus and found it empty. They came expecting to find a body and instead they found emptiness. Their words sounded like nonsense. The empty tomb is a compelling image.

Reminds me of Graceland. Who is buried at Graceland? ELVIS. When you go to Graceland, you go see his gravestone, and you learn that Elvis is not in the building. Elvis has left the building. Literally. They moved him to an undisclosed location, fear of grave robbers. We don't know where he's at. And with the fanatical devotion that some people have to Elvis, I can envision that happening. It's an empty tomb. Makes me wonder where George Washington is buried. Sure, he and Martha have their chamber at Mount Vernon, but I wonder if they are really there. Over the years, folks have taken "souvenirs" from the crypt. And in his time, they were still worried that the British could come back - which they did in 1812 - who knows what they would have done with the body if they had their chance. In 1830, a disgruntled gardener stole the skull of good ol' George, but turns out, he got a nephew's head instead. Things weren't well marked back - maybe on purpose. It wouldn't surprise me if they had their own secret location, different than the public's view. Maybe I do believe in a few conspiracy theories!

At least according to some accounts, stealing Jesus body was a concern of some of the Disciples as well a fear of his enemies in the religious and political establishment. Everyone wanted to know where the body was. And if it disappeared, the Disciples would have no holy ground to visit. And if it stayed around, the authorities would have proof that they killed him. The empty tomb could just be proof, not of resurrection, but of grave robbers. Worst practical joke ever. Or the person got up and walked away because of not really being dead in the first place - that's happened before. Resuscitation, not resurrection! There are plenty of rational arguments that can be spun in order to convince the skeptic why the empty tomb does not prove that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. But what convinced the disciples that Jesus was resurrected was not the empty tomb. It was the fact that they experienced the real presence of Jesus, who was the same person as before his death, but now bore the marks of his crucifixion. Another change in Jesus was that he would mysteriously appear in the midst of his followers, even when they were assembled behind locked doors. The disciples knew they had experienced Jesus and they had no doubts about the fact that this was the same person they had known before his crucifixion. And the same is true for any follower of Jesus. As a believer I can tell you that there have been times and circumstances in my life when I have known that Jesus was with me.

But I cannot prove that presence in a way that would convince anyone who are skeptics. Rational arguments just do not work. But I do know this: I believe we are constantly confronted by miracles and the resurrection is the miracle of all miracles. Explain it away if you like but we would not be here today if it were not for countless people over these last 2000 years who encountered the risen Christ in their lives. The angel at the empty tomb explained that the risen Jesus had gone ahead of the disciples and would meet them in Galilee. Put another way, what is being said is that Jesus who died in the past has been raised in the present and he goes ahead of the disciples to Galilee where he will meet them in the future. He is Jesus of the past, present and he is the Jesus of the future! Jesus is still ahead of us. We are not stuck with whatever our past may have been. We are not mired in the problems of our present. Jesus has gone ahead of us and will meet us in our future. Give up your fear! Give up your doubt! Give up your worry! And more than that, the risen Christ is open to all people. That my friends is Good News. All of us are in the process of being made whole (the religious word for this is redemption). Nothing in our life is the final word, not even death itself in whatever forms it presents itself to us. The risen Jesus heals our past, informs our present, and waits to transform our future. What the resurrected Christ did was to empower his followers to continue his work, be bearers of his love, be healers in his name, and work for justice and peace in the world. Christians have been killed, persecuted, ridiculed, reviled and dismissed but still the Good News lives on and in 2000 years of trying all those governments and individuals who have attempted to destroy Christianity from the face of the earth have failed.

There are billions of people who will tell you that because of meeting the living Christ and experiencing his forgiving love they have been able to put their past behind them and begin again. They have peace of mind and a life purpose that helps them meet the challenges of each and every day. There are schools, hospitals, day care centers, feeding programs, nursing and retirement homes, empowerment programs, support groups like AA and NA, orphanages, universities, libraries, and the list goes on and on and on of organizations and efforts for good that trace their origin to people who were inspired to do something good in the name of the risen Christ.

Easter is all about new life. Whatever fears we have can be set aside. Whatever haunts us from the past can be forgotten. Whatever worry we have placed upon our shoulders is also being carried by the one who made us. You don't think Jesus can help defeat a bad day? You don't think Jesus can help defeat despair and hopelessness and addiction and loneliness and frustration? We celebrate Easter, not because Jesus did something 2,000 years ago, but because he keeps doing it today. Whatever tomb we have put ourselves in, he can roll away the stone. Today! Easter is not about what he did, but what he does, to all who call on his name. Some say they don't believe in Easter. There's nothing in it they say. I believe in the power of Easter - I look at the tomb where he was laid, and I say, "You're right, there's nothing in it." He has gone ahead, to meet you, and you, and you, and me, where we are today. It's not about what he did, but what he does even today within our lives. Jesus has left the building. So let's go outside these walls and join him in the transformation of the world. And the family of God said, AMEN!