



Saint Peter's Episcopal Cathedral

Sunday, April 9, 2023
Easter Sunday

The Very Rev. Scott Anderson
St. Peter's Cathedral
April 9, 2023

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Do you all remember the name Nikolai Ivanovich Bukarin? I brought him up four years ago on this very night from this very pulpit. He was a powerful man in Russia as it became the Soviet Union. At the age of 29, he was a very important leader of the revolution. As a matter of fact, he became known as “the golden boy of the revolution”. After their revolution he was made the editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda and a member of the Politburo.

Nikolai was also an absolute atheist. He was such a committed atheist that he would even go on tour like some rock star of the revolution in order to “re-educate” the populous. In 1930, 13 years after the revolution, and 8 short years before he was executed by firing squad by his beloved communist party, he had taken his tour to Kyiv, Ukraine, a place that had been incorporated into the Soviet Union 8 years earlier. He yelled out to the massive crowd how their belief in God was nonsense and the opiate of the people.

As his rant progressed, he would fire all he had at Christians and Christianity and at the church with insults and arguments that would, he believed, seal his case. He went on and on for an hour barely taking a breath. Finally, as he did at the end of every event, he would stop and look out at the people sure that their faith was had been destroyed and then demand in a confident and arrogant voice, “Are there any questions?”

That night the silence was deafening in the huge auditorium. It went on for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, a man rose to his feet, walked to the front, and cautiously mounted the stairs to the platform. He slowly walked across the stage to the podium with its microphone. He hesitated for a moment, looking out at the huge crowd. He cleared his throat and called out to the people, “ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN!” And almost as one they all rose to their feet and called back in the words that have been said in greeting between people of faith for thousands of years even to this very day, “THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!”

And that is what I now say to you. ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN! (Congregation responds: THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!)

That is more than just a quaint religious greeting. That is a statement of what we believe. And it is a statement of who we are. Tonight, we celebrate Easter and acknowledge this truth... we are Easter people. We celebrate Easter and I need, I need to get up in front of a group of people and proclaim the truth that makes me who I am. I am an Easter person. I am a Christian, a follower of the Risen Lord, and I need to joyfully tell the world that on that first Easter morning a tomb that was carved out of solid rock that once contained the tortured, crucified, and dead body of Jesus, was empty. I need to say it and the world needs to hear it. ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN!
(Congregations responds: THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!)

You might wonder how I can be so sure. You might ask, "How do you know that the resurrection is real?"

First, I would tell you that I believe that the resurrection was real because somebody told me. And I am not talking about my childhood Sunday school teacher, or my priest, or a friend, or family member, all of which is true. But more than those people, I have been told by people who were there and knew, first hand, what happened. I have been told by Matthew and by Mark. Matthew told me that Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary went to the tomb early Sunday morning and they saw an angel who told them that they should not be afraid. Jesus wasn't there. He is risen. Mark told me virtually the same thing.

It was reported to me by Luke and by Paul. Peter told me. James told me and his brother John did too. We heard John this evening speak down through the years to tell us that he was there and the tomb was empty, and he saw Jesus, alive. They all told me. And they told me not just through their words written, but also through their lives lived. They told me through their absolute commitment to what they saw and knew. They told me through their willingness to give up their lives for something that these men were in the unique position of knowing absolutely whether it was true or not.

They told me through their transformation. All the men and all the women, who between the cross of Friday and the empty tomb of Sunday, went from being scared, hiding, and depressed to almost literally shouting from the rooftops! Saturday, they were a terrified band of disciples huddled in a room in a house with the door locked. But then something happened that changed everything. Something happened that transformed them into a powerful band of eyewitnesses who went out into the entire known world, facing all sort of threats, and obstacles, and death itself, in order to tell everyone that Jesus, who had been killed, was alive again and they had seen him.

Stephen told me about it. Stephen told me within that first year of the resurrection when he was stoned to death, as he prayed in Jesus name for those throwing the stones. Peter told me when he went to his cross, insisting that he be crucified upside down because he was unworthy to die in the same way as his Lord. Paul told me, not just from the letters he wrote, but also by the life he lived. He went from being a man out to arrest, or kill, every Christian he could find, to being a faithful and committed follower of Christ willing to give up his own life at the end of an ax rather than change a single word of his testimony. Matthias, Andrew, Thaddeus, Jude, Thomas, and all those who having been there, knowing the truth, never wavered once in their witness, not one of them, even being willing to die rather than recant. I know today because those who were there, witnesses to it all, have told me.

The second reason that I believe in the resurrection is that it has stood the test of time. Do you know that the proclamation of the Gospel is the most investigated, studied, argued about, and attacked subject in all of history? The Jewish leadership of Jesus' day did all they could to stifle the message. The Romans tried to persecute it out of existence. Heresies within the church rose up to try to take people down alternative paths. Other religions came into being with a message that Jesus was merely a good teacher, or possibly a human prophet in the line of Moses and Elijah. "Enlightened" human beings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tried to rationalize and intellectualize it into oblivion. Right up to today with its attempt to diminish and minimize the Christian witness in the public square, terrorize Christian elementary schools, silence faithful prayer, all in an effort to change its message to reflect the world instead of changing the world to reflect the message.

Time and time again the history and the theology of the Gospel proclamation has been challenged and time and time again it has been proven to be accurate.

Just ask Simon Greenleaf, an attorney, a specialist in evidence, and one of the founders of Harvard, why he thinks that the message of the resurrection and the Gospel flourishes. He would say...he said, "Let [the Gospel's] testimony be sifted, as it were in a court of justice... The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of its integrity, ability, and truth."

Or ask Sir Lionel Luckhoo, who is considered one of the greatest British lawyers of all time, having spent more than 42 years as a defense trial attorney and who holds the unique place in Guinness Book of World Records as the most successful lawyer ever. He said, "... the evidence for the resurrection is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leave absolutely no room for doubt."

Or listen to the once legal editor of the Chicago Tribune, a committed atheist, who took on the task to disprove the witness of the Bible in order to save his wife from her newfound faith, who after years of investigation, finally quit his job and joined the staff of a church because he had discovered the witness about Christ was undeniably true.

I believe in the resurrection because I have been told by those who were there and knew what really happened and because that truth which they told has survived the test of time. But if I am to be honest, I have to admit that even with those two facts being true, it is likely that that wouldn't have been enough for me. That, in itself, wouldn't have driven me to get up here and proclaim the truth of a Risen Lord. What makes me want to tell the world about Christ is not that through years of study I have intellectually sifted through the evidence and I now understand it all. What makes me who I am today is that I have seen it alive in people's lives and I have experienced it in my own.

I have seen how lives are miraculously changed for the better through the Gospel and presence of Christ. I have seen people with addictions find real and truly liberating freedom. I have seen people with anger and in broken relationships amazingly find true joy and lasting unity. I have seen people who are dying find ultimate peace. And I have personally experienced the transforming love of Christ in my own life.

We are Easter people. We are people of the resurrection. We are Easter people and not just for one day each year, but for all days and for all time.

That first Easter was the day that the world was changed for all time. And today God calls us to join in and embrace with confidence that mission.

We have been to the cross and saw what man can do and we cried. This evening let's stand before the empty tomb and see what God still does... and REJOICE!

ALLELUIA! CHRIST IS RISEN! THE LORD IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!