



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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EASTER SUNDAY

April 21, 2019

“Too Good to be True? No, Just Good and True!”

(Luke 24:41)

Rev. David K. Groth

“They still did not believe it because of joy and amazement” (Luke 24:41).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God the Father, through your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

On Tuesday I did a burial for Marie Scheler at St. Peter's Cemetery in Helenville. Usually the grave digger waits until the family has left before completing the burial. But in this case the family wanted to observe the whole process. And so we stood there and quietly watched. One man was able to do all the work. Clearly he had done it so many times that there were very few wasted movements. His choreographed dance was highly efficient, and used mostly non-motorized contraptions and gizmos beautifully engineered for the work of lowering the coffin into the vault, then lowering the concrete vault cover in place. The efficiency of it all made me think of the economies of scale, when average costs or efforts fall as output increases. Said another way, so many people die that we've become very good at burying them. If you've never seen the process, I'd recommend it!

Maybe that's what makes resurrection so hard for so many to swallow. We've never seen resurrection, only lots and lots of death. No other article of the faith contradicts experience as much as this one does. Our eyes have seen how death sweeps away all the world: kings and celebrities and athletes, young and old, billionaires and the poor, all the people of the world, one after another, are laid in the grave and buried. On the other hand, you and I have never seen God reassemble dust and ashes back into a living, breathing person with the same eyes, ears, hands and feet. It's so contrary to experience that we must rest on Scripture for this article of the faith.

Moreover, we've been conditioned to think when something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Ever get an email from a Nigerian Prince, promising a large sum of money in exchange for a small fee. Fat chance, right? To

thrive in this world we have to be wary of things that sound too good to be true. That's how it is today and that's how it was 2,000 years ago. So it should be of no surprise that the friends of Jesus are really reluctant to believe he rose from the dead. No one wants to be made a fool, and on that Friday they felt like fools. They had thought he was the Messiah, the king who would restore glory to Israel, but that bubble burst as the soldiers drove the first nail through his flesh.

They don't want to be made fools again. They don't want to fall victim to a scam. The women are going to the tomb intending to finish the burial process. My guess is they've done this many times and are themselves quite efficient at it. They are frightened by the presence of messengers in dazzling apparel and they are perplexed by the announcement that Christ is risen. However, it does not say they are convinced. In fact, the women seem guarded, skeptical, and when they run back to tell these things to the apostles, the men also dismiss the news as an idle tale. Later that evening, Jesus stands before his disciples. "Touch me and see" he says, but [quote] "they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement." It sounds too good to be true.

There is a risk of falling prey to scams and false news, maybe more so today than ever. But I think the greater risk on this day is missing out on the very best news the world has ever heard. The greater risk is dismissing as idle tale the most important news for you personally. The greater risk is in rejecting God's plan of salvation for you. Keep this in mind: if you believe in God, then you must be willing to believe in the miraculous.

What does it mean that Jesus lives? First the resurrection of Jesus means he really is who he says he is. Romans 1, "He was declared with power to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead" (v. 4).

It means the Father accepted the sacrifice of Jesus. You have peace with God not because you made your peace with God. That's nonsense; don't ever say that. You have

peace with God because he made his peace with you through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Romans 4, “Christ was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (v. 25). So the resurrection means God’s love is stronger than your sin.

The resurrection means life is not meaningless. The resurrection of Jesus gives purpose and direction to our lives because we are now accountable to our risen Savior. He seems to think your life is important and of consequence, and therefore he has high expectations for you, how you go about living your life. That’s what the resurrection means.

It means the goal of life is not gloomy, pointless self-preservation, the mother of all lost-causes. It means there’s more to life than trying to protect and preserve who you are and what you have. It means there’s more to life than whatever meaning and value you would otherwise assign it. The resurrection of Jesus challenges us to live above our natural disposition toward selfishness, to have more lofty goals in mind than the pursuit of leisure and happiness. The resurrection means we can give our lives away to others, as Christ the Lord gave his life to us.

The resurrection means the devil has been defeated. I imagine Satan prematurely rejoicing at the death of Jesus? “By gum, I think I’ve done it. God’s Son is dead.” I can also imagine Satan’s surprise when the risen Jesus shows up in hell to proclaim his victory?

In the monastery of San Marcos in Florence, there’s a fresco from the 15th century painted by Fra Angelico, one of the monks who lived there. In brilliant colors one of the frescoes shows the risen and victorious Christ standing with his feet on a partially opened trap door in the floor. Underneath this trap door there is a devil looking up, trying to pry himself out of hell, but he’s unable because the risen Christ has his foot firmly planted on the door. Similarly, Luther compares the devil to a bad dog on a chain: “Let the [devil] bare his teeth, make a great noise, threaten, and act in an unmannerly way; he can do no more than a bad dog on a chain, which may bark, run here and there, and tear at the

chain. But because it is tied and you avoid it, it cannot bite you” (*What Luther Says*, p. 402). That’s what Easter means.

The resurrection of Jesus also means we don’t need to live captive to our fears. Admit it: we are a fearful people. Most of all we fear death, and so we are afraid of cancer and heart disease. Because we fear death we are also afraid of violent crime, terrorism, war, car accidents. These fears rob us of freedom. Said another way, what kind of freedom do we really have if we’re living in fear? But the resurrection of Jesus means we are free to live without fear of death. Luther wrote, “Since death is called a sleep, we know we shall not remain in it; but we shall awake and live again . . . and we shall rebuke ourselves for having been so appalled and frightened at so fine a sleep” (*Ibid*, 379).

The resurrection means God’s love for you is stronger than your death. You can shake off the fear like a dog shakes off water. Paul says it better. “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:35-37).

If you’re getting up in years, you can feel the encroachment of death. You can feel it in your shoulders and knees and feet. You can feel it in the arthritis of your fingers, in the shortness of breath, in the interrupted sleep and unreliable sense of balance. You can see it in the mirror. You can see it on your calendar, where more time is allotted for the waiting rooms of doctors and dentists. Your body is preaching to you, and it’s not a very good preacher: all Law, no Gospel. And it’s the same sermon day after day after day: “The wages of sin is death.”

But the resurrection of Jesus preaches the Gospel. Because Christ is risen that must mean he’s more powerful than death. God promises your flesh will live again, never again to get old or die. Again, if you believe in God, then you must be willing to believe in the miraculous. For God who created us out of the dust, it’s really no trouble for him

to recreate us, even from the dust.

Don't water that down. Don't insult Jesus by suggesting Easter is about his spirit living on, his ideas, his love. Don't mock God with metaphor. Don't anger him with analogy. Don't side-step him with notions of ethereal transcendence. No, Jesus was fully, in the flesh dead, as dead as dead can be, irrevocably dead. Today, Jesus is fully, in the flesh alive. That very fact has implications for your throbbing shoulders, knees, and feet, for your arthritic fingers, your sense of balance. It has implications for your calendar, what you will choose to do with your time. It has implications for your face. If the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the love of God has touched your heart, please inform your face!

It means the one who joyfully shouted the galaxies into existence has not abandoned one little bit of his creation. It means what he did for his body he will do for our bodies, and what he will do for us, he will also do for his whole creation.

In Isaiah 51 God says "the earth will wear out like a garment" (v.6). We are witnessing just that, mostly because of our poor stewardship of it. But the resurrection of Jesus means the whole creation will one day be made new and glorious. The promise of resurrection is not just for people, but I believe somehow it's also for the dirt, for lakes and streams and oceans, for birds, and beasts and creeping, crawling things. For all the species that were created in the beginning, for all the species that were led onto the ark. Creation is caught up in salvation history. Just as the whole creation fell with Adam and Eve's Fall, so also Christ died for the world, and not just for people, so the whole creation will be impacted by the death and resurrection of Jesus, for there will be a new heaven and new earth.

Too good to be true? I don't think so. I think it's quite consistent with a God who is good and true and powerful.

We are very good at burying the dead. That's what we do. God is very good at creating, and redeeming and

recreating even from the dust. That's what he does. Thanks
be to God! Amen.

Christ is Risen!

