

The Second Sunday of Easter
St. John 20:19-31

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The open tomb, the empty bench, the unoccupied grave cloths, the folded cloth—these are all negative evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. They don't necessarily prove that Jesus rose from the dead. They merely prove that Jesus' body was not in the grave.

One can assume that Jesus rose, given the negative evidence, but there needs to be more to make such an assumption. So, you can add all of the times that Jesus predicted His Passion. "And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31) Jesus suffered many things. Jesus was rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes. Jesus was killed. Furthermore, He was buried in this tomb and a large stone was rolled in front of it. Jesus said He would rise again, but I guess that would only qualify as circumstantial evidence.

Early on the first day of the week, the women made their way to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away and an angel sitting in there telling them that Jesus had risen, just as He said. Were they witnesses? The angel told the women to tell the disciples, and Peter, that Jesus was going before them into Galilee. At first, the women ran away in fear. For some reason, the evidence just didn't add up for them. Even though Jesus had said all of this would happen, and even though they found an empty tomb, and even though the angel told them that Jesus had risen, they just didn't get it.

Eventually, the women did find Peter and John and tell them. These two ran to the tomb to see for themselves. They looked in; they go in; they saw the negative evidence. John wrote that when he went in and saw, he finally believed, but what exactly did he believe, for he also wrote, "[F]or as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead"? (John 20:9) Once again, even though Jesus had said all of this would happen, and even though they found an empty tomb, and even though the women relayed the angel's message, as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

So, the disciples were in the upper room, and the doors were locked. They were afraid...afraid for the lives, in fear of the Jews, that they would storm down their doors and accuse them of grave robbery, another conclusion that could be drawn from all that negative evidence, but they knew that *they* hadn't done that. Still, they were afraid that Jesus wasn't really raised from the dead.

Into this room Jesus came to them, despite the locked doors. He spoke to them, "Peace be with you." He showed them His hands and side. Finally, they received some positive evidence! Jesus was standing among them, flesh and blood. He breathed on them, something only a real person would do. Jesus has risen, just as He said.

A week later, He did the same thing. This time, Thomas was with them; he had remarked that he would not believe unless He had some real, tangible, positive evidence. "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side." I like to imagine a stunned Thomas as Jesus was talking to him. The doubter defiantly stated that he would not believe, then Jesus appeared to him in all of his resurrected glory. Thomas was frozen, and Jesus told him to put his finger into the hole in His hand, then to put his hand into His side. In his stunned state, Thomas couldn't react, so Jesus reached out to Thomas as He said that, grabs his hand and thrusts it into His side. Jesus doesn't just bid Thomas to touch Him, but does the work for Him. This is an image which fits in nicely with the Lutheran doctrine of *grace alone*, but it is purely speculation on my part (though I'm not alone in it). Nevertheless, with grace-only-filled words, Jesus bids Thomas, "Do not disbelieve, but believe."

"My Lord and my God!"

The women and disciples had seen the negative evidence. They rejoiced to see the positive evidence. Hallelujah! Jesus is risen, just as He said!

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” The resurrected Jesus appeared to many more who believed—more and more witnesses of the positive evidence. There were the disciples along the Emmaus road. (cf. Luke 24:13-35) He appeared to seven of the disciples as they fished along the Sea of Tiberias. (cf. John 21:1-14) He appeared to Saul on the Damascus road. (cf. Acts 9:3-8; Galatians 1:15-17) He even appeared to over 500 disciples at once. (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:6) These all were granted positive evidence of Jesus’ resurrection. These all spoke to others and declared, in one way or another, “We have seen the Lord!” And their testimony is recorded for your benefit. One witness could be lying; two or three could be a conspiracy, even though that’s what was legally required to establish a fact in dispute. You have the account of over 500 witnesses right there in the seats with you!

What you don’t have is the positive evidence of the Lord’s resurrection. The tomb still exists, and it is still empty, so you may have the negative evidence, but after all this time, such evidence cannot be trusted, except that you also have the words of Jesus Himself, that He had to suffer, die, and rise again. The tomb is empty because Jesus rose on the third day. However, you also have the eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ appearance to the disciples, and they declare to you that they have seen the Lord! This is how you are blessed to believe who have not seen, as Jesus told Thomas.

But, you do have evidence, though it is unseen. Jesus appears before you, even today, to do just as He had done that evening on the first day of the week, and the night the week after. He comes to you, here, and gives Himself to you. He breathes on you and gives you the Holy Spirit. He gives you His own body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. And all of this He does for your benefit, that you have forgiveness, life, and salvation.

These He earned for you by His life of perfect obedience, both as He kept the Law perfectly in every single precept, but also as He fulfilled it for you in His sacrificial death on the cross in your place. He rose from the grave, as He said, to seal these to you, and that you would have victory over death and the grave. You have His word on it. You have heard the evidence, both positive and negative, through the eyewitness accounts. Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

In the meantime, He gives you His Word and Sacrament.

It is the Word that declares to you that when the Word of God is combined with water, it is for you a life-given flood, full of grace, and a washing of regeneration in which you have been given the Holy Spirit. In Holy Baptism, you have been washed, made clean and pure, and claimed as a son of God, co-heir with the One who has given His life for you on the cross and rose again. In Holy Baptism, you have died and were buried with Christ, that on the last day, you would rise in a resurrection like His. You have His Word on it!

It is the Word that declares to you that when the Word of God is spoken over you by the one placed in your midst by God, He speaks in the stead and by the command of Jesus. In His stead, this man declares to you that you are either forgiven or that your sin is bound to you, and in both cases it is as valid and certain as if Christ your dear Lord had dealt with you Himself. This man is under orders to forgive the sins of the penitent, and not forgive those who see no need nor have any desire for forgiveness; he does not forgive or bind on a whim. This man’s forgiveness is God’s forgiveness, won for you on the tree of the cross, and apprehended for you by the faith and Holy Spirit that you have been given in Holy Baptism. You have His Word on it!

It is the Word that declares to you that when the Word of God is spoken over some bread and wine, they are for you the very body and blood of Christ given and shed for you on the tree of the cross.

You take and eat and drink the very wounds of Jesus, which He showed to the disciples, and into which He shoved the hand of Thomas. In them, you receive forgiveness, life, and salvation. You have His Word on it!

Jesus Christ reaches out to you with His Word, entrusted to men to proclaim and speak into your ears. He reaches out to you, grabs you, and places you into Himself. He gives you Himself in Word and Sacrament, placing Himself in you! You have been gathered here, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, receiving Him. You have His Word on it!

Jesus Christ has died, but He is risen and ascended, for you. You have His Word on it! Though you do not see, as Thomas and the others saw, you believe, because the Word of God declares to you the truth, the truth which was verified by the eyewitness accounts. Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. And you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.