

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 handkerchief—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 is 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. You can add to the negative evidence all the times that Jesus predicted His Passion. "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." (Matthew 16:21) Jesus predicted His Passion three times. Thereafter, Jesus suffered many things: He was rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes; He was killed. Furthermore, He was buried in a tomb and a large stone was rolled in front of it.

All of that stuff happened, as Jesus said. He also said that He would be raised on the third day. Adding Jesus' predictions to the empty tomb, you now have 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. 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 do find Peter and John and tell them. These two run to the tomb to see for themselves. They look in; they go in; they see the negative, circumstantial evidence. John wrote that when he went in and saw, he finally believed, "[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 from the dead.

So, the disciples were in the upper room, and the doors were locked. They were afraid. They were afraid for the lives, in fear of the Jews, that they would storm down their doors and accuse them of grave robbery. They were afraid that Jesus wasn't really raised from the dead.

But 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. Here is 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 with Thomas present. The disciple had remarked that He would not believe unless He had some real, tangible, positive evidence. I guess he was only asking for the same things that the others got, but maybe it's the way he said it—maybe there was a hint of defiance when he said, "Unless I see...I will never believe." "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 defiant doubter stood before Jesus in all of his resurrected glory, frozen as the Lord bids him to touch His hand and side. I like to talk about the Caravaggio painting because it depicts what I like to imagine: the incredulous, frozen Thomas having his hand thrust into Jesus' side by the Man Himself; He didn't just bid Thomas to touch His wound, but did 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...

and Caravaggio's, I assume. 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!

The question might as well be asked now. What is it that John (and perhaps Peter) didn't at first believe? What is it that Thomas refused to believe unless he touched Jesus' wounds? If you are of the mind that they didn't believe in the resurrection, or perhaps better put as a resurrection, remember that these men all witness Lazarus being called out of the tomb. (cf. John 11:38-44) It seems that John gave the answer. After he went into the tomb, John saw the burial cloths but no body and believed, because to that point, they didn't understand the Scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead. (cf. John 20:8-9) The concept of resurrection is fine, but that Jesus had to rise was, for some reason, unbelievable to them.

Maybe they were just coming to terms with the fact that Jesus is God or still wrestling with calling Him a prophet mighty in deed and word who then died. Perhaps the same thought was going their minds as went through the minds of the men on the road to Emmaus who unknowingly said to Jesus that they had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel. Jesus called them foolish and slow of heart to believe, reminding them that it was necessary for Him to suffer these things and enter into His glory, that is, rise again. (cf. Luke 24: 19b-27)

So, seeing the empty tomb and remembering His words, hearing Jesus open their minds to the Scriptures concerning Himself, finally seeing and touching Jesus' wounds, they finally believed that Jesus HAD to rise from the dead—just as He said.

So, He asked Thomas, "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. In addition to the Emmaus disciples, He appeared to seven of the disciples once again 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.

You do not have 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. You also have the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' appearance to the disciples, and they declare to you that they have seen the Lord! Therefore, you can also believe that Jesus HAD to suffer, die, and rise again, and that He did so for you.

Still, you do have other 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 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 fact, you could say that He MUST 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, so that on the last day, you will 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 withhold forgiveness from those who see no need nor have any desire for forgiveness; he does not forgive or withhold forgiveness 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!

You have His Word on it: those most sacred Scriptures. Of them, St. Paul declared: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the Scriptures...*" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4) When he wrote, "...in accordance with the Scriptures..." he's telling you that Jesus does as He must, that He keeps His Word. His Word declares to you that He must return, and that He will do so for you, members of His Bride, the Church. Do you believe this?

Peter, James, John, and even Paul, among many others, believed because they saw. Blessed are you who have not seen and yet believe. You believe because they saw—because they heard and saw. They heard that Jesus had to suffer, die, and rise again. They saw Him suffer, die, and rise again. He also said that He will come again. They heard Him say that. They reported to you that He said that, just as they reported that He suffered, died, and rose again, just as He said, in accordance with the Scriptures. The question is, do you believe this?

Jesus Christ has died, 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 it to you, and by grace you believe it. The Word of God also declares this truth to you: you are forgiven for all of your sins. Therefore, by grace and the indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit, you can confess and believe the three-fold truth: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

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