

Rev. Matthew Versemann  
Trinity Lutheran Church  
Decatur, Illinois  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Of Easter  
April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## **THEN HE OPENED THEIR MINDS**

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!

Hear the Word of God from Luke 24,

*“Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them: “Thus it is written: That the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins be preached in His name to all nations.”*

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST,

So here we are on the third Sunday of Easter and the news still seems hard to believe, doesn't it? Christ is risen, we say, and yet somewhere in the more rational recesses of our minds there is this little flicker of doubt that goes, “really?” How can you know for sure? Beyond a reasonable doubt, at least, or to some reasonable certainty?

How do we really know anything of the past to be true? Some people think the only way to the truth is science – hard data and tests. CSI crime scene investigations. They always clinch the case with cold, hard facts, right? That's why the phrase “studies have shown” is so compelling. It has this impressive ring of truth to it. Even if you never see the data, you assume that it's true, because, well, studies have shown it to be true. Studies have shown that eggs are bad for you. Later studies have shown that eggs weren't so bad after all, and some studies suggest that eggs might even be good for you.

Some talk about a “leap of faith” and simply believe that something is true because we want to believe it. It’s a bit like bungee jumping. Jump off the cliff or bridge and hope the big rubber band will hold you, even though you haven’t tested it. People trust the government, though governments don’t have a very good track record when it comes to truth telling. Would you give over a third of your income and the nurture of your children to a total stranger just because he says, “Trust me”? We confess that we believe in the resurrection of the body. That’s the whole point of Easter. The body of Jesus is risen. And our bodies will rise on the Last Day, guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus. But how do we know it’s true? How can we know that it’s better to trust Jesus instead of Mohammed or the Buddha or the Dhali Lama or our own gut feeling?

In Luke, the fact of Jesus’ resurrection is always underscored by a meal. Jesus appeared to two disciples in Emmaus at a meal. They were prevented from recognizing Him earlier, even though one of them, Cleopas, was the brother of Joseph. But they immediately recognized Him when He broke the bread at the dinner table. And the two immediately rush back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. And the disciples tell them that Simon Peter had already seen Him. While they’re comparing notes, Jesus appears in their midst and says, “Peace be with you.” That’s the Easter greeting. It’s how you speak in the resurrection. Death is defeated. The grave can’t hold us. Sin is forgiven. Life is restored. There is peace. And so, “Peace be with you.”

The disciples are startled and afraid and doubting. They think they’re seeing ghosts. But this is no ghost or illusion. Jesus shows them His hands and His feet, those wounds by which we are healed. They mark Him forever as the Crucified One, the One who laid down His life for the sin of the world. The wounds also authenticate Him. This is the Lamb who was slain but lives.

Jesus invites them to touch Him. He is touchable. Real. Bone of our bones, flesh of our flesh. That’s why we believe our bodies will rise from the dead and we don’t just go on as “spirits” or “souls,” because Jesus rose bodily from the dead. His tomb is empty. The disciples not only saw Jesus, they touched Him. Flesh and bone. Still not convinced? Still uncertain? Dead men don’t rise, ordinarily. Jesus takes a piece of broiled fish left over from dinner, and He eats it right in front of them. It’s not that He was hungry. And He wasn’t looking for a snack. More evidence. Ghosts don’t eat fish. Or really anything, for that matter. The is flesh and blood Jesus consuming a real piece of fish. Eating is a body thing.

There's something more going on here. Something a bit "fishy," as it were. Psalm 74 says: You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. Leviathan was the great "sea monster," the dragon of the sea, the devil. The image is that Leviathan was being served up as an appetizer at the messianic banquet, which is why the Jews always had a course of fish on the Friday evening Sabbath meal, and why Catholics traditionally eat fish on Friday, and why Jesus multiplied bread and fish in the wilderness. Jesus' eating fish in the resurrection is a sign that He has conquered Death and the devil who is now served up as a first course. Fish as food never represents Jesus. He is the bread of life and living bread but He is not fish. Instead, He's the One who swallows Death and devil. "Death is swallowed up in victory."

Jesus does more than snack on fish with His disciples. He sends them. Resurrection appearance and sendings always go together. What was seen must be told. Eyewitnesses must tell what they have seen and heard.

First the risen Lord Jesus Christ validates the Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament – Moses, the prophets, the writings (Psalms). It's all about Him, about Jesus, about His death and resurrection. That's the key to understanding the Old Testament. Look for Jesus. Even before the name of Jesus was known, even before the Son took on our humanity, the entire OT testified to Him.

The Bible is the record of the Mystery dwelling among us, the Word that made all things in the beginning, the Promise to one man named Abraham that created a nation of out nothing slaves. The Word that brought freedom from slavery, that split the Red Sea, and carved out the only nation in the history of the world that could be called God's nation.

Imbedded in that history of Israel, all of its battles, all its ups and downs, successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, is this one message: That the Christ, God's anointed One, the Messiah, would suffer and die and on the third day rise again. Centuries, literally thousands of years before it all happened, it was written down and handed on, all pointing to that one very good Friday when Jesus said, "It is finished."

And then Jesus did something remarkable. He opened their minds. Does that strike you as strange? They are standing there, seeing Him eat fish, they know their Bibles, they've been instructed personally by Jesus for three years, and yet even now, He must open their minds. It tells us that you can know all the facts and still not believe. You can know the Bible by heart and still not trust that it is for you. We are born closed-minded. Sin has shut our minds from God and given us a "god delusion." We think we're the gods. We think our word carries the day. We think we're the masters of our own destiny.

In the third article of the creed, our catechism teaches, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him." Our reason alone can't get us there. Our minds are closed to our own salvation. They must be pried open by the Spirit of Christ. They must be opened to understand the Scripture, as St. Paul says, these things are "spiritually discerned." That's why we don't just go around handing out Bibles, as good as that idea sounds. That's why Jesus didn't leave us with a book, but with apostles to testify, and ministers to preach, and a church to proclaim, and Baptism and a Supper.

The resurrection of Jesus is historic fact. This is true. But it is much more than that. It is Gospel, good news. It is a living word from a living Lord preached into ears that pries open closed minds and turns hardened, sinful hearts to the forgiveness of sins. Though the death and resurrection of Jesus is anchored in history, these are more than history, these are your life and your salvation and your hope of resurrection to life with God.

Think for a second of how you came to believe. Someone told you. Maybe that telling was your parents bringing you to Baptism as a baby, to church and Sunday school as a child. Maybe that telling came from a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor. Someone told you.

The disciples told what they had seen and heard, beginning in Jerusalem and went as far as they could. Tradition says that John made it to Asia Minor. Thomas went to India. Paul, who wasn't one of the Twelve, took it all over the Mediterranean world. In our time, the good news came to our ears, as much of a gift to us as that first Easter was to the disciples.

You, in turn, tell others what you've been told. That's how it works. It's not the most efficient way to get things done, but it's God's way, so who's going to argue? You are witnesses, testifying to what you have seen and heard, bearing witness to the fact of the resurrection of Jesus and the world's death and resurrection in Jesus. There are no "professional witnesses" in God's church. No hired experts. There are simply disciples – sent into the world, sprinkled as salt over the earth, scattered as light in the darkness.

Remember this as you tell others: Faith is not founded on feelings but on facts. Lay out the facts. The cross and the open, empty tomb. The depositions of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The entire OT Scriptures, which are able to make people wise to salvation in Christ Jesus. The sacramental signs, the visible, tangible ways that Jesus reveals Himself to us – Baptism, the Supper of His Body and Blood, the word of forgiveness.

This dying, confused, messed up world doesn't need religious opinions or mantras or methods or programs. It needs just one death and one resurrection. The One with the wounds and words of salvation. The One who swallowed up death like broiled fish. The One to whom Moses and the prophets and the psalms testify. Jesus, your Lord and your God. In the name of Jesus, Amen