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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Easter (Year A-08)

Isaiah 25: 6-9
Matthew 28: 1-10

“The Proof of Faith”

From the very beginning people have tried to prove or disprove the resurrection. You may recall at the end of last week’s reading of the passion narrative the chief priests and Pharisees approaching Pilate, asking him to place guards in front of Jesus’ tomb so that his disciples couldn’t steal his body and tell people he had been raised. Pilate tells them to see to it themselves and Matthew reports that they sealed the tomb up tight, which seems like an odd detail for the Gospel writer to include, unless that is, some were already trying to disprove the resurrection by claiming the that is precisely what the disciples had done. Therefore, in an odd way we can say that Matthew may have documented the very first case *against* the resurrection.

Of course, on the other hand, the Gospels themselves are the first cases *for* the resurrection. Matthew and the other Gospel writers go to great lengths to make their case by listing eye-witnesses who saw Jesus after he was raised. It has long been pointed out that the Gospel writers’ agreement that the women were the primary witnesses to the empty tomb is good evidence that the story is not falsified. The reason being is that it doesn’t make sense for the Gospel writers, if they were simply making the story up, to have used the women as the first to reach the tomb, because women were not counted as reliable testimony at the time. The only way it makes sense for them to report it this way is because they know that is the way it actually happened. But still, you’ll notice that none of this actually proves or disproves the claim that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. In a court of law it would be dismissed as hearsay.

Perhaps what we need is physical, incontrovertible evidence to hang our hats on. Maybe something like the Shroud of Turin¹ will give us what we need to decide. Proponents of the Shroud claim that it is the actual, physical burial cloth of Jesus of Nazareth. But having Jesus burial cloth on its own doesn’t prove anything about the resurrection. All it proves is that Jesus died and was buried. But what is remarkable about the Shroud as you may know, what has intrigued believers and doubters for

¹ General information from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shroud_of_Turin

centuries is that it bares the image of a man, a man that some say looks remarkably Christ-like. The claim is that the image on the cloth is evidence of the resurrection, that it is the physical by-product of the miraculous event. The problem, of course, is that we cannot recreate the resurrection event and so cannot verify that it would produce such an image. At the same time scientist who have sought to disprove the validity of the Shroud, to show that it is a hoax, have failed to do so. What has always fascinated me about the Shroud is that no one has been able to replicate the image it contains by any known means, even with what we think of as today's advanced technology. What's more interesting and confounding to some is that even carbon dating tests have proven inconclusive. So once again, attempts to prove, or conversely, disprove that Jesus was raised from the dead using the Shroud have failed. But we are making progress; at least the Shroud has moved us beyond the realm of hearsay and given us physical, tangible evidence to debate, which brings us to the most recent controversy relating to Jesus' resurrection.

Last year the world was presented with another piece of tangible evidence.² This time, unlike the Shroud, the evidence claims to once and for all prove that Jesus was not raised from the dead. Even though this evidence only gained notoriety recently, it was actually discovered in the early 1980's when archeologist uncovered 10 first century Jewish family tombs in a southeast neighborhood of Jerusalem. The discovery of the family tombs, which are called ossuaries, is in and of itself not remarkable. But what is remarkable are the names that are inscribed on one of the tombs, which include Jesus, Joseph, Mary and Matthew, all names known to us from the Gospels. There is another name which is not found in the Gospels and which is notable for obvious reasons, Judah, son of Jesus. But before we jump to any *Da Vinci Code* like conclusions, it is worth pointing out that many scholars and archeologists remain unconvinced that this tomb is the genuine article. While the idea that there would be a family tomb containing these names and it not be the same Jesus reported in the Gospels may seem unlikely to you and me, the fact is that all of these names were extremely common in first century Palestine. It is indeed quite possible that the tomb could be genuine, and contain the bones of first century Jews by those names and

² General information from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_tomb

that it would still not be the same Jesus reported in the Gospels. Furthermore, a lot of experts remain suspicious of the claim due to the fact that the ossuary and its contents have never been subject to a process of public verification. Any studies conducted have been done in private and always controlled by those who stand to profit from these provocative claims. Yet what cannot be denied is that the claim itself still raises many questions: Could this really be Jesus' family tomb, containing the bones of Jesus of Nazareth and his family? And if so, does it put the final nail in the coffin of any arguments for belief in the resurrection? What then of the Gospels' claims that Jesus was raised on the third day and the accounts of the women finding the tomb empty?

Many view such findings and questions as threatening to faith. They worry that such evidence may very well cause some to doubt the certainty of their faith. But, I wonder, is that really such a bad thing? It has been said that "the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely."³ Faith is not about evidence or certainty. *It is* about the ability to trust in something that is bigger than our categories of true and false, right or wrong, valid or invalid. Faith, by nature, cannot be proved or disproved. At the same time it is not anti-intellectual. It is not necessarily opposed to science and reason. As William Sloan Coffin writes, "*Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible. It has what we might call a limbering effect on the mind; by taking us beyond familiar ground, faith ends up giving us that much more to think about.*"⁴ Or, from a slightly different angle, consider these words from author and pastor Frederick Buechner: "*Not the least of my problems is that I can hardly even imagine what kind of an experience a genuine, self-authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.*"⁵

It is interesting, when the director of the documentary that reported on the so-called Jesus family tomb was asked about the religious impact of its claim he said,

³ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2005) pp. 256-257.

⁴ Credo (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p.8.

⁵ I am not sure in which of Buechner's many books this quote appears, but I know it best as one of the epigraphs to John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

*“People will believe what they want to believe.”*⁶ In other words, if we are predisposed to believe, we will seek evidence to support our belief. If, on the other hand, we are predisposed to be skeptical we will seek to find reason to doubt. In the end, that may be about all we can say with regard to 2000 years of trying to prove or disprove the resurrection accounts of Jesus as reported in the Gospels.

Where does that leave us? Well it may leave us a little frustrated, still wanting some tangible evidence to hang our hats on. It may leave us wondering if such a wonderful story can really be true. But on the plus side it leaves us with room for doubt and room for faith and therefore room for us. It also leaves us with room to make our own individual cases for belief in the resurrection. As New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes, *“Christianity has never been able to ‘prove’ its claims except by appeal to the experiences and convictions of those already convinced. The only real validation for the claim that Christ is what the creed claims him to be...is to be found in the quality of the life demonstrated by those who make this confession.”*⁷ Or as Minister of Harvard’s Memorial Church Peter Gomes writes, *“The evidence of Easter is a reconfigured Easter people...people who dare to live by their affections and not by their fears, people who know that they need not die in order to truly experience resurrection living...In short, people such as you and me who aspire to be people like that.”*⁸ And so perhaps the best question we can ask ourselves on this Easter morning is not do we really believe in the resurrection beyond the shadow of a doubt, but does our faith make a noticeable difference in our lives? Perhaps the quest we need to be on is not one that searches for tangible evidence that Jesus’ was raised from the dead, but one that shows that we, as Christ’s followers have been raised to new life ourselves?

Perhaps this morning’s message has caught you off guard. Maybe you came expecting to hear something else from the pulpit, something more definitive, especially given a misleading title like “The Proof of Faith.” Maybe you came expecting me to make a case for belief in the resurrection. But the truth of the matter is anything I

⁶ To the best of my recollection these are the approximate words and general sentiment of the documentaries director Simcha Jacobovici in a 2007 interview.

⁷ *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996) p. 168.

⁸ *What We Forgot to Tell You*, collection of sermons delivered at Harvard Memorial Church, 2002-2203.

could say in that regard wouldn't be all that convincing anyway, that is unless you have already been convinced. But what if you haven't already been convinced, what if you harbor doubts? Heck, what if we just admit that we all have our doubts from time to time, that they are a part of our faith, not opposed to it? If that is indeed the case, then I think Matthew has some really good, if not unexpected news for us.

Maybe you missed it. Perhaps you were too caught up in deciding whether or not you really believed in THE good news of Jesus' resurrection that you skipped over the other good news that Matthew slips in there: the good news that the women didn't run to the tomb expecting to find it empty. Instead, Matthew tells us that they went there to pay their respects. But when they heard that Jesus wasn't there, that he had been raised, Matthew tells us that they experienced a mixture of joy and fear. Not one or the other, but both together. In fact, in all of the Gospels, whenever any of the disciples first hear the news that Jesus' has been raised the reaction is not a proclamation of belief, but one of astonishment, fear and even doubt.

Therefore, from the earliest accounts of Easter, from the very first attempts to make a case for the resurrection, we are assured that *it is not the certainty of our belief that counts; it is our ability to trust, to live in faith and hope, even when certainty is elusive or even unobtainable.* For in the end, if Easter is to be demonstrated at all, it must be realized and lived out in the lives of those who are willing to step out in faith and follow in the path where our Risen Lord is leading, trusting that he is ahead of us, waiting for us, calling us, guiding us, and that when we go, not with absolute certainty, but when we find the faith to follow none the less, there and then, we will see and experience and know him and, through God's grace, others may even come to know him and his love through us.

Let us pray: *You startle us, O God, with your truth, the truth that Christ is risen and that your love is stronger than death. We come here this morning as the women came to the tomb, with our uncertainties, our doubts and fears. Renew our hope and our courage, teach us the ways of your love, that we may participate in the new creation you are bring about through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.*⁹

⁹ This prayer is inspired by one given by the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago on Easter, 2006.