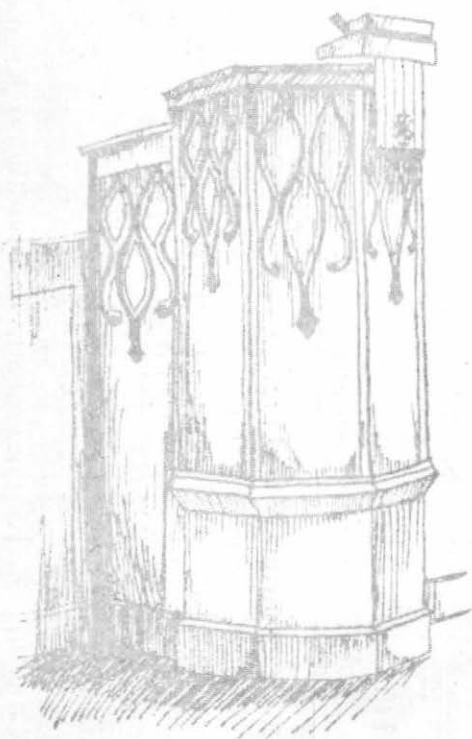


The Southminster Pulpit

"THE THIRD DAY, AND AFTER..."



Text:

"Blessed are they that
have not seen, and yet
have believed."

John 20:29

Easter, 1981

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I want to start this morning by telling you a joke, 'whose sole purpose is to make you laugh'. And, lest you think I have gone a little bonkers, let me hurry on to reassure you that there is impressive historical credence for such a surprising opening to an Easter sermon. Throughout the dark and Middles Ages it was customary for clergy to provoke the "Easter Smile" (the Risus Pacalis) by telling funny stories from the pulpit. In fact, one scholar noted that their sense of humour became so "broad" - whatever that means - (unbearable might be a better word, knowing most clergy stories) that Pope Clement X actually prohibited pulpit jokes by an ominous and official decree from Rome.

Now of course, back then Easter followed on the large and self-denying fasting of the cold and bitter winter weeks of Lent. Through the preceding days of Holy Week, they had walked and suffered and even died with their beloved Lord. By Easter morning they were ready for a joke. Their celebration often began at midnight Saturday, when the doors of the great cathedrals were thrown wide open and, with candles and torches, they marched with merriment in the streets breaking - even annihilating - their Lenten fast; and, if they were still awake by morning, they were ready for a laugh, at least....Are you ready for the story?

There was this proper Presbyterian woman who had a little parrot as a pet, and the parrot's name was Polly. A nicer parrot you would never want to see, prim and proper and pretty. The only problem was that Polly had an awful habit: Whenever she met anyone, she screeched out loud, as parrots do: "Whoopie, Charlie, I'm a good time girl!". And on and on she went, embarrassing her mistress, until one day - near Easter - the Presbyterian parson came to call, old Reverend Weems. Sure enough, as he entered the apartment, Polly shouted, "Whoopie, Charlie, I'm a good time

girl!" Oh, the Rev. Sir was shocked and so was the proper Presbyterian owner of the parrot. "I'm sorry," she said. "I think that I can help you," said the Reverend. I have two parrots down in my study at the Church. They are so well behaved I think they would be a good influence on your Polly. In fact, all they ever do is pray - all day.

So, she agreed, and the Reverend took poor misbehaving Polly to the Church. When he entered his lovely Study, sure enough his own two parrots were respectfully praying. And dear Polly bellowed out her, "Whoopie, Charlie, I'm a good time girl!", upon which the Parson's proper parrots stirred; and with his wing the one up and nudged the other quite excitedly, and said, "Hey Luke, wake up, we finally got what we've been praying for!"

Now, if we should go downhill from here - that's unlikely I'd say - then at least you have had your Risus Pacalis, your Easter Smile, and all will not be lost....Let us pray...

O Lord, for the joy of Easter morning, we thank Thee. O Risen Christ above the earth but with us here each passing moment, renew us as we celebrate this day. Guide us with your Spirit through these words of Scripture and what we say about them, that it will have mattered that we paused to listen for your Word and find our lives and hopes renewed. Amen.

Thomas had to see before he could believe, and I wonder what you think of that or him. Let me warn you before we go a moment further that old Thomas is a friend of mine, a fellow traveller on the road I often trod. He is a friend of mine, and I will defend him to my dying day and, should they let me, even after that.

Throughout the centuries, he has been maligned, as was the one who brought his doubts to bear. Old "doubting Thomas" is the epithet we use to stifle any open conversation, to shush any probing question, and the barb we use to nail down the edges of our guilt; as if it were somehow more Christian just to accept it all in acquiescence and rest content and never ask a question. Meanwhile, I like an honest man, and I think there is a secret touch of Thomas deep in us all. Everytime we use the brain God gave us to stretch a little further, everytime we peek over the edge of disbelief, everytime we cannot understand and want to know some more - the patron saint we need to hold our hand is Didymes, the Twin. He was not bad, and in the end he found his faith, or was it that his faith found him....(Like Mrs. Darwin said of Charles after he had written THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES, "I don't know if he believed in God and all the miracles, but I know that Christ believed in him.")

The Bible says that Thomas was not there when Jesus came to visit the disciples on that first Easter evening. Where he was, it does not say. Perhaps he needed time to be alone. His was a different grief, the greater for the greater struggle he had known, a cautious man, who had finally found his peace....But just when he had it, it was gone! Sudden death has a way of doing that. It does not fit our categories of what is good and right and fair. It cannot, does not, fit into the framework of it all. Little wonder Paul calls it the last enemy.

Thomas was the kind of man who solved his problems by himself. That's OK, but the pity still is that he was not there when Jesus came to visit the disciples. Later, when he returned, they said: "Thomas, He was here. We saw Him!" Thomas stared and stalked in disbelief: "Come on," he murmured, "Dead men tell no tales. Dead

men do not rise...Unless I see the nail prints in his hands, or touch the wound within his side, I never will believe it, period!" And off he went again....

Until, eight days later, when they were together in the house again...This time, Thomas too, was there. And Jesus suddenly appeared among them. How he got there, no one knew. But he said, "Alright, Thomas, put your finger here...What happened to your faith?" Thomas shuddered and answered, "I have been a fool. My Lord and my God, you're really here!" Cautious he was, but Thomas was not dumb. He did not make a fetish of his doubt. A seeker Thomas was, but when he found the one he sought, his seeking days were done. He would not pretend; but when he saw it, he believed....We must get it straight: Thomas is a friend of mine....

Then, we had better clarify another point before we go much further: I am not trying to convince you or to coerce you into believing the events of Resurrection morning. That is not my goal. To argue for the empty tomb would be a foolhardy exercise, and anyway the empty tomb can take care of itself - it needs no defense from me. The empty tomb is not the final proof of whether Christ is risen or whether Christianity is true. The final stroke, which ties the knot for good, is the personal testimony of those who actually saw and see. In the Scripture, the empty tomb provokes nothing but dismay. It proves nothing consequential. It only proves His body was not there.

I hate to say it, but a careful reading of the Easter story in the four gospels creates some difficulties. There are several puzzles. It all begins in the darkness, sometime before the dawn. None of the four canonical accounts pretends to tell you what happened, only that when morning came

the stone was rolled away and the body of Jesus was not there....Let's take a look:

In the first gospel, Mark, there are no post-Resurrection appearances. Two women, both named Mary, find the empty tomb. They see a young man dressed in white who assures them all is well. Then they go away and tell no one anything. Matthew largely agrees with Mark; but, as the women leave in fear and great joy, Jesus met them, and they took hold of his feet and worshipped him.

Luke says that three women were there, who met two angels who told them to go on to Galilee where they would see him. Then Luke adds two scenes: The disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, where curiously they do not recognize him. And he also appeared to the disciples, with whom he ate a piece of broiled fish and walked them out to Bethany where he said goodbye.

The last of the gospel writers, John, has Mary Magdalene going to the tomb alone. Seeing the stone rolled away, she ran to Peter and John, and they ran back to the Tomb to see for themselves. As Mary was weeping, two angels reassured her; and, as she turned around, she saw Jesus standing there. When he spoke, she recognized him, but not before. Later he appeared to the disciples. Then he came back to visit Thomas. And finally, one morning on the beach, he cooked a farewell breakfast for them all.

Now why would I elevate this evidence, and cast suspicion on the story?...To let you know the truth...If it had been a prepared story, fabricated, as the reporter did in Washington, at least they would have made it jive....Hardly contrived; no conspiracy here at all. There were four separate traditions recollecting this

amazing event. It does cause problems, even for the believer...Little wonder the Bible says there were many around who did not believe it....

Matthew refers to the rumor that the disciples had stolen the body; and some who saw it, Matthew says, still did not believe it. They were not naive. Doubt is not new. Samuel Butler's hero in THE WAY OF ALL FLESH, the clergyman's son, lost his faith when confronted with this varied evidence and became an open agnostic. It makes my faith the greater....Rudolph Bultmann, the eminent New Testament scholar, shocked the world by writing of "the incredibility of this mythical event of the resurrection of a corpse". Bultmann does admit that something happened which changed the disciples' attitude; the "X" factor, as Dibelius once called it. Surely something did happen which changed them. What was it? "X", my foot! What recreated their joy after the dismal events of Friday afternoon? The "X" factor, Christians have always believed and said, is Christ's Resurrection from the dead, not so much an empty tomb as the witness of those who actually saw the Lord...It was not wrong for Thomas to want to see....

The earliest mention of the Resurrection, by the way, is not in any of the Gospels. It is in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (55 A.D.) when he lists the testimony of those who actually saw the Lord: "He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (eleven really), then to five hundred most of whom are still alive (in case you want to check with them) though some have fallen asleep, then to James, then to all of the apostles....then (watch it!) last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me." Paul is speaking...What could he mean? Does Paul believe that his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus was the same kind of appearance which the disciples and the five

hundred others had? When he uses the words "was raised" from the dead, he is saying by a reverential interventive act of God Jesus Christ was changed from one mode of existence to another: from the perishable to the imperishable, from the mortal to the immortal. Everyone from Peter on through Paul saw something of the same....

When he says Jesus was raised and that He appeared, what he means is not that his mortal body was miraculously resuscitated into life again, but that his whole self, his whole existence, his whole presence, was transformed; and from his new eschatological dwelling (or rather in it) he was truly there! Not in the body as we know it, but raised and renewed already - That is what Paul seems to say. It was not a common vision, either, to be sure; no hallucination, no mental projection from the sky - the Risen Christ was really there in a personal encounter. They saw Him. He was there.

Deep down inside there is a longing to believe in that. At the core and center, we all need an Easter morning - not just that Spring will come again as it does each year, and the pretty flowers grow and the birds on the wing again and the warm sun to green the fields and turn our hearts away from winter. Spring is a blessing, to be sure, but Easter is more than Spring! We need to know that all is well, to have some inner assurance and security about what this life can mean, where it all is going and where it has been and how we too might get there, that it all can be renewed.

So along comes Easter morning,"the land where the great mists lie (old Principal Cairns of Aberdeen is speaking), but the land where the great rivers spring"...."We saw him, Thomas, honestly we did...."

Now it all would be quite incredible, my friends, if it stood alone, like an isolated event which defied all the other human things we know. The mythical stories of god and men who came back to life are legendary. I shall never forget my own puzzlement when I first came across the preponderance of these similar episodes. Toynbee tells of 168 parallels in other ancient religions with the life and death of Jesus. When I first read Mueller's USES OF THE PAST, my faith went spinning like a top. I do not say it to alarm you, friends, but to let you know that Thomas has been my friend for almost more years than you could ever guess on hearing me today. Christ's affirmation of him in the middle of his doubt has always been a gift to me.

Now, it all would be incredible...it would be a stupendous impossibility...if it stood alone, if it were the only miraculous event we knew. If it were the only one - but of course it is not. It is not even the greatest miracle in the Bible, as unusual and demanding as it is. It follows on cue in a long line of mighty and miraculous things...another episode in the tremendous theme which begins way back in Genesis. The universe is the greatest miracle of all: out of nothing the whole world came to be, and then it moved to life...Each moment, should some cosmic observer have been looking down, he would have said, "I don't believe it! HMMMMM...out of an enormous big bang explosion came the sun and then the planets and then the heavens, then the earth, then that first stir of self-generating movement... I don't believe it!"

Then people came with their societies and their self-governance. Then (as Teilhard noticed) the birth of love, concern, the embryos of peace...If some observer looked in, he would have said each time, "That's impossible...it could not be. Someone has made it up." Each time a newborn child arrives, from the act of procreation in a few months it forms itself and comes to greet the world, carrying within

its makeup—seeds enough to form the following generations, the movement of its brain, its heart, its hopes. Someone looking in would say, "You're crazy, man...It could not be...." When Harlow Shapely looked at all the possibilities, he concluded that human beings could not be; and Professor Concklin said that "life coming by accident is equivalent to a Webster's unabridged dictionary resulting from a mad explosion in a printing shop".

That should speak to the little Thomas doubt within you, that search you are involved in, that wondering, God-given brain you have. Whether the Resurrection could or could not be is not the issue. I think the question rather is, knowing something happened, "I wonder what it was?". Knowing someone motivates the mass of God's own people, I wonder who it is?....

What started life and why? Who set it all in motion? Random...ah, nonsense! Who set the stars upon their courses, who taught the birds to fly (we're back in Job), who knows the mighty deeps which form the ocean's restless waves? Is it any more incredible to think of life itself than to think of life anew? Is it any more a miracle that a life comes back (or goes on) than that it first began at all?

Harry Williams from Cambridge said that was one aspect of our problem: we try to isolate the Resurrection, fix it in a moment's time two thousand years ago or ponder vainly what will come on some other resurrection moment meant for me, when it is but one of many moments, when it is consistent with the resurrection movement which we see in the birth of all creation, to the birth of individual life, to each new created moment which we each experience every passing day. Everytime new hope is born it is a kind of mini-resurrection. Everytime a child comes home, it is mini-resurrection moment. Everytime a broken dream is mended,

a broken relationship restored or illness overcome, everytime we rise up again after we have fallen on our faces...we have a start on Resurrection morning.

It is not all that incredible or unusual. It belongs to the sanctity of life, part of God's unfolding story of his power and purpose on the earth. If not, it is all a hoax; and, while I could live with that if it were forced on me, and trudge on anyway, it surely is a better risk (Pascal once called it) to step out in trust, believing where we cannot see. Hurrah for Thomas when he finally opened up his eyes!

Now the one thing yet remaining is for me to tell you that I believe in the Resurrection of the Living Christ. First, because it is a gift; we do not deserve it, we never earned it, we cannot earn it now. I am not an essentially trusting person. I am critical, analytical. I make decisions carefully. But Karl Barth once taught me that all revelation comes from the scripture as a gift. One weighs the evidence, seeks God's guidance, then you must decide. It is too great a decision to allow to hang in limbo. It is too important a journey for you to stand bewildered at the crossroads evermore. Let's get it underway....

Secondly, then I believe in it because it is not an isolated event. It belongs to a far larger question than the question of whether Jesus rose up from the dead. It has to do with the total story of what God has in mind. Everything I believe about the miracle of creation and about the miracle of life, about what God is doing in his world, it fits.

Some people, the Bible says, actually saw it. Mansfield Kaseman, in this famous case in Presbyterianism, was asked, "Did the physical body rise and walk?". He said, "I am not sure." Those who were around when Jesus came said, "We saw the Lord." They were privileged; and you might say, "Wouldn't it have been great if we could have been there too. That

would have settled it. If I had only been in Galilee in 30 A.D., that would have settled it. I wouldn't have to wonder. I wouldn't have to worry. Because I would have seen him, too..." Hmmm, I wonder if that is true, because just when you say it, you must remember that they too doubted what they saw, that many seeing did not believe, that their categories of things possible did not allow for dead men rising up. And anyway, if the other miracles of God do not inspire or impress you, this one will not do so either.

That is why Thomas is a friend of mine. Because Thomas doubted, Augustine said, I do not have to doubt anymore. Jesus said, "Have you believed because you have seen, Thomas? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe..." And blessed, I remind you, means happy! For now and evermore. Amen.

This sermon is printed as preached from the Southminster Pulpit, and is not edited for publication.