

Welcome, everyone, and thank you for being here as we celebrate the most sacred day of the year. I especially want to welcome those who are visiting home this weekend, and those who are here for the first time, and those who are here for the first time in a long time. As I say here often: we here at St. Gabriel's embrace that we are a group of sinners, each and every one of us, who rejoice because we have found mercy in Jesus Christ. This church is not a church of the perfect – maybe you can find that church down the road, good luck getting in. No, this church is a place where we struggle together, support each other, pray for each other, challenge each other to keep moving forward and grow in love of God and neighbor, knowing that we all sometimes fall and need mercy. We have all come here by our own unique path, filled with victories and failures, joys and sorrows. Whatever your path has been, it really doesn't matter. We are just thankful that it has led you here today – please know that these doors will always be open to you.

Today is the most important time in the Church, because we celebrate the heart of our faith. What is our fundamental belief as Christians? Above all else, our fundamental belief is that Jesus Christ is the Lord. That is the hallmark of all Christian faith. If someone says, "I'm a Christian, but I believe Jesus was just a good guy and nothing more," our response would be, with all due respect, that they

are not, in fact, Christian. No, to be Christian means to believe that the human being, Jesus Christ, was and is God incarnate.

The reason we make this extraordinary claim is because of the extraordinary thing that Jesus did, that no one else had ever done or has done again: he rose from the dead and still lives today. That is the very heart of our faith, and what we celebrate on this Easter day and on every Sunday. Christ died. Nothing noteworthy there. But then, he rose. That's noteworthy. No mere human being could do that. We all die and stay dead. But Christ died and then rose again, and left his tomb, empty, and ascended to heaven. That is why we believe that Jesus Christ is not just a good guy or amazing prophet, but that he is Lord.

But how do we know that he rose from the dead? Ultimately, we know because there were witnesses. In our gospel, we are told that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary saw the empty tomb, and an angel telling them that Jesus had been raised. Later, we are told again that he appeared to Mary Magdalene, and then to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He appeared to the apostles in the upper room, and then did so again, this time with doubting Thomas present, who put his fingers in the nail marks and his hand in his side. He appeared to the seven who were fishing, and asked Peter three times if he truly loved him. And the apostles

saw him ascend to heaven, until an angel came and said, “Why are you still here? Christ has ascended, and he will return in the same way.” There were witnesses.

That is the foundation of our faith, that Christ rose from the dead, and we know that he rose from the dead because he appeared to his disciples. Without that testimony, we wouldn't be here today.

But that's only part of the story. That is only part of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Yes, to be a disciple of Christ means that we have faith in the eye-witness accounts of two thousand years ago that Jesus Christ is Risen. But just as important to our discipleship is our own personal encounter with Christ today. Our faith is not just in an event that happened long ago in the past – it is in a personal being who formed you in your mother's womb and knows your innermost thoughts and desires and loves you with a passion that would leave us speechless if we could truly comprehend it. Our faith is not just about what happened in the past. It is about what the Lord is doing in your heart as I speak, and the life he is calling you to live.

The lives of the disciples before they encountered Christ and after they encountered Christ were dramatically different. No longer fishermen and tax collectors and Pharisees and prostitutes – that was in their past. They encountered Christ, and became champions of the Christian faith, displaying heroic virtue,

putting their past behind them and living for love of Christ. Jesus did not care what kind of life they had led up to that point, it was irrelevant. He found them, he loved them, and said, “Follow me. Leave your old life behind you, and follow me.”

And he says the same to you. He says the same to me. “Follow me. Leave your old life behind you, and follow me.” We are invited to allow Christ to touch our hearts and to reorient our lives away from that which is harmful and self-destructive and towards that which is life-giving. Whatever kind of life we’ve lived up to this point, we are invited today to live for Christ.

Following Jesus must change our lives. If it doesn’t, then we haven’t really begun. None of his disciples remained the same person after they became his disciple. If you need some help, well, join the club. Jesus gave us each other so that we wouldn’t have to figure this out on our own. You have gifts that can help others, and others have gifts that can help you. That is what we try to do here at St. Gabriel’s. I encourage you, if you are ready to take your next step in discipleship, to engage in our parish life and join this imperfect, searching group of disciples as we do our best to help each other live up to the great calling that God has for us.