

“Don’t Take It for Granted”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday – March 31, 2013

Luke 24: 1-12

Change. It’s not something we often handle very well. And it doesn’t matter whether we are yearning for it, or dreading its onslaught – we never are prepared for it. We can wait and wait for years for change to take place, and eventually get fed up and move on before we witness its arrival. Or, in the midst of our comfort and peace with life, we can be completely startled by change, and resist it with all the energy we can muster. As human beings, we don’t handle change very well.

And yet we must accept the fact that today everything has indeed changed. All of us who are gathered here today have to come face-to-face with the reality that change is in our midst. The world as we know it will never again be the same, and we have to come to grips with that reality if we are to be honest in our faith.

Indeed, that is the reality which the women and disciples woke up to on this first day of the week. This day after the Sabbath, the women got up and planned to fulfill the duties which they knew needed to take place – namely to care for their master in the tomb with spices and ointments. This was the routine which they fell back on in the midst of their grief and trauma from the events of the past week. After so much hope, so much joy, so much optimism, they were now left with shock and sadness with the death of their teacher and friend.

“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb . . . [and] they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling white stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their heads to the ground . . . ‘He is not here, but has risen’” (Luke 24: 1-5).

In the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, change has entered the world in a way no one can ignore. It’s not the sort of thing which you explain away in conspiracy theories, or assume is nothing but an elaborate hoax. It is the real deal.

To be honest, the disciples were more than a bit numb by this change when they first heard of it. “[The women] returned . . . and told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened” (24:9-12). Disbelief; amazement; shock – these are some of the responses which often accompany change. And they are the natural reactions which occur when we are confronted with a power which is beyond our comprehension.

Martin Marty, though, speaks of how Luke’s version of Easter morning puts an emphasis on the power of testimony and witness. *A witness sees or experiences something and then is moved to write or tell about it. A whole sequence of testifiers connect us witnesses. (The women) in the story witnessed and then gave testimony. We are told that they “remembered” (v. 8) earlier witness from Jesus himself. Then*

these givers of testimony turned the “eleven and all the rest” (v. 9) into potential testifiers.

Sometimes stories are too weird to be taken seriously, and sometimes the tellers of the story are weirder yet, in which case we would dismiss them. In our story, however, the testimony eventually was believed. (Peter heard and became curious, and saw the linen cloths lying by themselves.) These were close enough to what matters to inspire amazement, and amazement is often a first response to testimony.

Thanks to these first-day witnesses, there came later sets of witnesses, namely members of a community that kept the saving story alive long enough for Luke to stitch together a rich narrative. Thanks to all of them, twenty centuries later, the story is passed along to all of us, even though we were not there. We can be amazed and tell others.

Amazingly, “many believed.” They believed not because someone produced and waved the Shroud of Turin. Hearers did not look at such artifacts or wave cloths and claim proofs. What do witnesses do when they testify? They put their lives on the line (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009, 350-352).

“Witnesses put their lives on the line.” That seems a bit melodramatic, doesn’t it? I mean, here we are in 21-century America and for most, if not all, of us, our lives are not at risk by being witnesses to the resurrection. We come to church – today and other Sundays – and worship the living God. We go about our weekly lives – work, school, play, family – and our faith is there, but it’s not life-or-death. The idea of witnesses putting their lives on the line for their faith is more applicable to places like China, the Middle East, and other places where Christians are in the minority, right?

And yet, as we will say in our affirmation of faith today, and as Marty notes, it was due to the testimony of many faithful witnesses that the crux of our faith was made known to the world. Jesus does NOT appear in this Easter Sunday morning account; the risen Christ does not appear in Luke’s Gospel until he walks alongside two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is because of many faithful witnesses – from the women, to Peter, to Luke, to martyrs and saints, to women and men and children for over two-thousand years – that this no longer became an idle tale. It was due to many faithful witnesses, who never took for granted the crux of their faith, that we are gathered here today, believing that the world has changed forever.

But has everything changed in us, or do we take this day for granted? On this Sunday, when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, are we open to experiencing our own resurrection? Joan Chittister writes:

The old news about Easter is that it is about resurrection. The new news may be that it is not so much about the resurrection of Jesus as it is about our own. Unfortunately, we so often miss it. Jesus, you see, is already gone from one tomb. The only question now is whether or not we are willing to abandon our own, leave the old trappings behind, and live in the light of Jesus, the Christ, whom the religious establishment persecuted and politicians condemned . . .

It's at the tomb that we discover things about ourselves. It's at the tomb that we come to make sense of the questions that have dogged us down the weeks of Lent. At the tomb they all come together in one great, blinding awareness. The Easter truth is that however disturbing each of the questions may be in themselves, they are not actually separate questions at all with which we have been confronted these weeks. They are all the same . . .

Like the women who go to the [cemetery] on Easter morning to bless the body because of which their entire lives had been changed, we have been preparing for six weeks to answer this last, most momentous question: Will we ourselves, touched by Jesus, now rise and do life differently? (National Catholic Reporter, April 6, 2001, www.findarticles.com).

How will we be witnesses to the resurrection of Christ, so that we might rise and do life differently? Will we take for granted what God has done for us this day, or will we live every day in the deepest of gratitude for the empty tomb? Will we take for granted this community of faith to be there whenever we need it, or will we actively participate in this group of witnesses as if our life depended on it? Will we take for granted that someone else will testify to this day's events, or will we put our lives on the line to make sure the Easter story never fades away?

This morning, four young men and women will be confirmed as active members of John Knox Presbyterian Church. Maddie, Scott, Erin and Spencer have all been baptized as children, but now they will confirm their baptismal vows by making their public profession of faith. Over the last five months, they have learned, discussed, debated, and asked questions on their faith, and with the help of their adults mentors, they are prepared to be the disciples of Christ God has called them to be.

My prayer for them is that they will never, ever take for granted the gift of faith which God has blessed them with in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and nurtured for them in the church. My hope for them is that they will live each day as humble servants of our servant Lord. And my joy for them is that they will be faithful witnesses of the resurrection through their lives of testimony.

As Maddie, Scott, Erin and Spencer are confirmed today, may we recommit ourselves to not take this day for granted – ever. And as we walk alongside them in faith, may we face our own empty tombs, having the courage to live our lives in ways which honor the one who has given us new life this day.

“He is not here; he is risen.” Alleluia! Amen!