

Sermon #1,199: St. Matthew 12:38-41, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
4-3-16, 2nd Sunday of Easter "Thomas Sunday," Bethany-Princeton MN

HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD THE THIRD DAY, AS HE SAID

Prayer: Risen Lord Jesus, You rose again the third day according to the Old Testament Scriptures. You have given us Your holy Word which records in the New Testament the eyewitness testimony of Your resurrection. Please fill us with faith and trust in Your resurrection and all it gives us. When we have trouble believing in You or trusting, we ask that You would not forsake us but appear to us again in Your Word as our risen Lord who has triumphed over all. Make us faithful witnesses of You, our living Lord. Amen!

The Text, Matthew 12:38-41; 1 Cor. 15:3-8. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." ³⁹ But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and indeed a greater than Jonah is here."

³ For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. ⁶ After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. ⁷ After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. ⁸ Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who is risen from the dead, by His death trampling down death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life:

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the center of the Christian religion. This is the case that the apostle Paul makes, writing inspired by God, in 1 Corinthians 15. The point of these words, "**He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,**" and then the list of the times the risen Lord

“was seen by” all those different people and groups, is that this is what establishes Christianity as not just some “Jewish sect” as the Romans thought and not just as “one path to God” among many, but Jesus rising from the dead establishes Christianity as the only true religion, the one true faith.

It is as if all creation were holding its collective breath during those 3 days when Jesus was dead in the tomb. What if He would not rise from the dead? This is the most dramatic time period in the history of the world. If He did not rise, then sin and death win, then God is not true, then there is no forgiveness but sin remains; and there is no eternal life but this life is all there is. This is what 1 Corinthians 15 teaches. Our verses that state the historic event and add Jesus’ resurrection appearances are only the beginning. St. Paul goes on to say: ***“If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.”*** Further: ***“And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!”*** (1Co 15:14, 17).

Because Jesus’ resurrection is the foundation of Christianity, we should spend more than one or two Sundays dwelling on it! This year as we hear sermons on the catechism – which is not just a book but actually the instruction of the basics of the Christian faith – we are going to take our time unpacking the gifts of the risen Jesus.

Today we note especially Jesus’ actual rising from the dead the third day. The angels at the tomb included a mild rebuke of the disciples by adding the words ***“as He said.”*** Shocked at Jesus’ empty tomb? His disciples shouldn’t be, since Jesus had said He would rise from the dead, and even said it would be on the third day! The angels said it happened ***“as He said.”***

It amazes us that the disciples did not remember. Jesus said it many times. But the really perplexing thing is who did remember He said it – His enemies! Because He said it to them too, and they did not forget. It is there in the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection, as recorded in the gospels.

Right after His burial, Jewish authorities came to Pontius Pilate asking for a military guard at the tomb, and why? They said, ***“We remember how that deceiver said, ‘After three days, I will rise’”*** (Mt 27:63). During Jesus’ trial they brought up what He said 3 years earlier, charging that ***“this fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days’”*** (Mt 26:61). Although they changed it to say it was the actual temple, their coming to Pilate shows they understood it was about rising from the dead, that Jesus ***“was speaking of the temple of His body”*** (Jn 2:21).

There is another example of Jesus saying it to His enemies. It is this occasion when He brought up Jonah. He said, **“As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”** Jesus calls this **“the sign of Jonah.”** It’s neat that Jesus is totally accurate with this – not saying Jonah and the whale, but **“the great fish.”** He presents this as history, which it is. It was history that they all knew. But He wasn’t teaching a Bible class to His disciples; Jesus was addressing the scribes and Pharisees, whom just a moment before He had called **“brood of vipers” (Mt 12:34)**, and who boldly responded to Him by demanding a miraculous sign as a condition for them to believe in. He called them **“evil”** for placing conditions on Him for their faith, acting as if He were to be subservient to them, and He said the only “sign” He would give them would be that of Jonah.

In other words, Jesus said, He would **“be three days and three nights”** – and only that long! – **“in the earth.”** He would rise from the dead on the third day. That great story of Jonah that everyone loves, this is the point of it. It was a preview of Jesus’ resurrection on the third day!

So when the apostle Paul writes that **“He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures”** – the Old Testament Scriptures – which Old Testament Scriptures spoke of Jesus rising the third day? Why, the book of Jonah! Jesus revealed this to His enemies. But His disciples were listening.

Fast-forward to the day Jesus rose from the dead. His third day in the tomb. The disciples were gloomy and depressed. They were not ready to believe. Let’s not be too hard on Thomas, whom they couldn’t convince later. The other ten couldn’t be persuaded by the women. They were skeptical.

This is important because we meet this skeptical attitude in our world today, and also because we are not immune from it either. Christianity is always being attacked, and one of the chief points of attack is Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. This is because of what I said earlier, that if Jesus did not rise from the dead then all of Christianity is not true. We admit that.

We respond to these attacks defensively. You bristle when you hear an outspoken atheist or enemy of Christ arrogantly challenging the truth of the resurrection and the truth of the Bible. You naturally think of them as enemies. But they are not enemies. Notice how completely non-defensive the words of the New Testament are.

Certainly the apostles are unafraid to write about the unbelieving Jews who originated the “stolen body theory,” the lie that the disciples stole the body of Jesus out of the tomb and then claimed He had risen. The apostle Matthew wasn’t afraid of writing that in his gospel, because the apostles knew the resurrection was true. They were eyewitnesses. The risen Jesus appeared to them all those times that we heard – **“that He was seen by Cephas [Peter] ... by the twelve ... by over five hundred brethren at once ... by all the apostles.”** They knew the truth of Jesus’ resurrection could not be disproven. If the authorities could’ve produced a dead body of Jesus, they would have. The disciples couldn’t afford to twist the facts or they’d be discredited. They kept saying things like *“as you yourselves know” (Ac 2:22)*, and *“this thing was not done in a corner” (Ac 26:26)*.

But they were also unafraid to write about their own skeptical nature. They show their own forgetful selves, how the enemies were better than Jesus’ friends at remembering that He said He would rise again the third day. They show how slow they were to believe the word of the angels, and the words of the women. They show how they weren’t very good at this.

Your first thought might be that you want to hide this information. But it is actually a great testimony. As one Christian says: *“The apostles, what were they: Fishers, customs officers, men with practical professions, used to dealing with reality, not easily led by the nose. We can be thankful that they were skeptical. And we should understand men who are. It was because of this that it is all the more sure, as Luke says: It was through many certain proofs that He convinced them and overcame their doubts” (Bo Giertz)*.

So the apostles’ slowness to believe, and forgetting Jesus’ words too easily, is actually something that should be a comfort to us. Because we are not immune from this either. Aren’t you sometimes slow to believe? Doesn’t the gloom and darkness descend upon you sometimes, where you feel things are hopeless and bleak, or you can’t stop worrying, or you are filled with anxieties and nervousness, sometimes you aren’t sure you can be forgiven, or you get stuck in the past, you can only regret things or you can’t get over some guilt, or you have gloomy forebodings about the future? You might even have times when you wonder about God or the Bible. Fear can come upon you: What if it isn’t true? What if Jesus didn’t really rise?

You are in great company. The disciples were there before you. The risen Jesus was seen by them, and it confirmed the Word which is true.

They realized that this was done according to the Old Testament Scriptures, the book of Jonah chief among them. He stayed only three days in the earth, just as the history of Jonah taught would be the case. He raised the temple of His body on the third day, just as He said – many times – that He would.

You also have the testimony in the New Testament, from the apostles, of the triumph of Jesus' resurrection in their hearts, and of the power of the Word to give them the faith that they otherwise would never have obtained.

The apostle John writes of this especially. He writes of that occasion early in Jesus' ministry when He told the unbelieving Jews, ***“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,”*** that ***“when He had risen from the dead His disciples remembered that He had said this to them, and the believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said”*** (Jn 2:19, 23). He says not only did they believe Jesus' word but they learned from the Holy Spirit to connect this to the Old Testament Scripture – Jonah, I presume – about rising the third day. John also writes of when he himself came and saw the empty tomb on Easter morning, that the disciples ***“did not know the Scripture as yet. that He must rise again from the dead”*** (Jn 20:9).

This should give you hope. Just as the disciples' weakness was turned into strength when the risen Jesus came to them so they could see Him, and when the Holy Spirit opened their minds to understand the truth of His Word only in the light of His resurrection, this is a promise of what He will do for you. When the doubting and the darkness come, you can shine the light of His Word upon all of it to chase it away.

Just as He was patient with them He is patient with you. Just as He did not leave Thomas behind but came back to see Him, He comes back to you time after time. In His Word the risen Jesus is seen by you. This is what will give you faith, make you strong, and lead you to say, *“My Lord and my God,”* with a believing heart. You will stop doubting and you will believe, not by your strength alone but by the strength of His Word. Amen!