

"ON PROVING THE RESURRECTION"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

Mary Magdalene is not what we would call the most reliable witness. In those days and in that culture, you had to have two male witnesses to prove anything legally...which probably helps to explain why Mary ran to fetch Peter and John to have them witness what she had just seen. Which she did...and they ran back with her to the tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea where they had tenderly laid the body of Our Lord, and indeed, witnessed what she saw. The tomb was empty. Two male witnesses would have made that admissible in court.

Now back in those days before Christianity liberated women, Mary's testimony wouldn't have stood on its own two feet. She would have had a tough time getting a hearing. Besides that, she had a bit of a history of emotional instability. Jesus, you may remember, had healed her of seven demons and ever since she had been following Jesus and the disciples along with other women around the towns of Galilee. Now - today - she's being called on to offer proof of what she saw.

IMAGINE HER NOW IN COURT

Imagine her in some court being questioned as a witness, if indeed they would let her take the stand as a witness in the first place. Then imagine yourself as the one who is questioning her as to the reliability of her experience of the Resurrection.

It has already been established that the tomb was empty and there were two witnesses to that. There were probably others since the rumor was going around right from the start that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus from the grave. Therefore we know that it was widely known that the grave was empty. We'll concede that, but it doesn't prove the Resurrection. An empty grave can be explained by other means. Mary is now on the stand.

You begin your questioning and ask, "Mary, do you have any other evidence?" She says, "Well, Yes. I saw Him." You ask, "Did the other disciples see Him then, at that time...at the tomb?" "No, just me." And about that time you remember Mary's record of emotional instability. And you ask again, "Are you sure that you saw Him, Mary?" "Yes, I did". "Well, did you touch Him?" "No" "Why not?" "He told me not to". "I see, Mary". "All right then, you may step down". And there you rest your case.

YOU RUN INTO TROUBLE

You see, if you are going to depend on Mary Magdalene's testimony to start things off in terms of resurrection, you have trouble from the beginning. And they compounded it by writing it down. They didn't have to do that. They could have forgotten Mary and just recorded that John and Peter witnessed the empty tomb. That would have been more convincing. But they didn't do that. They said Mary saw it first - the empty tomb. And not only that, but they said that Mary was the first person to see Him resurrected.

Then they recorded all those other Resurrection appearances that fell into place after Mary made her testimony. They were happening all over the place, each one a little different, some of them contradicting the others. Some said that He could sit down and put away a good fish dinner. Others said that He appeared as a spirit that could pass through doors. Some said that He was recognizable as Jesus of Nazareth. Others said they didn't know who He was at first. He told Mary, "Touch me not." To Thomas He said, "Touch Me."

An Editor today would probably send the Gospel manuscript back for further revision, saying in the margin, "Make up your mind. Which way was it. You can't have it both ways."

NOT ARGUMENTS TO CONVINC

So the first point I want to make this morning is that the narratives of the Resurrection in the Gospels are there not as arguments to convince anybody. If their purpose had been to convince somebody by argument, they would have editorialized them and glossed them over to get rid of the inconsistencies and the contradictions.

The accounts are there in the Gospels not as arguments to force our minds into submission, but rather as invitations inviting us to believe. They are there to announce that Christ is risen! And the clumsiness of the whole business...the lack of polish...the primitive quality of the testimonies themselves...are to me beautiful evidence of their authenticity.

One should beware of any testimony that sounds all alike. It probably means that it has been rigged! For instance, when a congressman gets mail by the bag, attacking a certain piece of legislation, and all the mail reads the same, the same vocabulary, the same sentences, even the same syntax, then he rightly assumes that the opinions contained therein were not reached independently. Somebody is telling somebody else what to say. link?

Therefore, the carelessness in going about the selection of witnesses to the Resurrection and the variety of their testimonies...the inconsistencies you find within the text itself...these have a ring of authenticity about them. They haven't been touched up or glossed over in order to fool people. They are there as remembered, and they were remembered simply to make the announcement, "He is risen". Not to argue about it. Simply to announce it...an invitation to believe.

THE PROOF IS IN YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE

Which leads me to the second point, and that is that the proof of the Resurrection is in your own experience. It's always been that way. The Church was not organized to defend a miracle that occurred in the past. It was organized to celebrate the Presence of Jesus with us - here and now.

What was being claimed in the Church was not that the grave was empty, but that Jesus is Lord! Not that death was cheated back there, but that you can live victoriously now. The Resurrection is not only an event that occurred 2,000 years ago; the Resurrection is a fact about life for those who believe.

Back when I was in Seminary I had a Professor who insisted that his students use intellectual rigor in thinking about the Christian faith. One day he came to class and posed this question: "Would you still believe in the Resurrection if word came that some archaeologist had uncovered the true grave of Jesus and found all the remains intact?" I remember one student, eager to please the professor and to show him he was a man of reason, said, "No - if the evidence contradicted the Resurrection, then we would have to revise our belief in order to fit the evidence." The professor replied: "Then you don't believe in the Resurrection!" For the proof of the Resurrection does not rest precariously on some archaeological evidence waiting to be found. The proof of the Resurrection rests solidly on your experience of His Presence - His Spirit - in your life - here and now!

The purpose of Mary Magdalene's and Peter's and John's and all the others' testimonies that are in the New Testament to the Resurrection are there simply to invite you to believe that "He is Risen" - not to prove it to you. The proof comes, as it always has, when you believe it yourself, and have the courage to follow a life of faith based on the fact that He is risen!

To me, one of the redeeming factors that there were so many varieties of experiences of His Resurrection is that it reveals He will also come to us in a variety of experiences. So don't feel that you ever have to conform to somebody else's experience. Be suspicious of all religious formulas that are proposed to you as a way to salvation. Find Him your own way. Test Him in your own experience, and the uniqueness of it, the personal quality of it, will be the evidence of its validity.

There is a marvellous anecdote about Albert Einstein. Einstein brought about a whole revolution in the way we look upon the universe. And he did it intuitively. He never worked a single experiment. He just sat in his chair, without any socks on, smoked his pipe, contemplated the universe, and worked out a vision of the way things really are, a vision, as he put it, that was so beautiful it had to be true.

One day somebody asked Einstein, "What if the Eddington experiments in 1919 proved that the stars did not move?" thus proving that Einstein's Theory of Relativity was wrong. And Einstein replied, "It would only have proved that their instruments were not accurate."

The Resurrection has also brought about a whole new way of looking at our world. The vision of the Resurrection says Jesus is Lord, and the fulfillment of our lives comes when we live our lives in obedience to Him. And the one who believes that knows in his or her own experience if that is true. If the world says that vision is foolishness, then the Christian says, the world is wrong, and in the words of St. Paul, "We choose to live as 'fools for Christ.'"

IN YOUR OWN ACTIONS

So the purpose of the New Testament is to announce that Christ is risen, and invites you to believe it. Secondly, the proof of it comes in your own life. And finally, the evidence of your faith is in your actions.

The Letter of I John is a companion to the Gospel of John. The Gospel announces the Good News; the Epistle of John applies it in a practical situation. From the Epistle we can see that it was not very long after the Resurrection that the question was being asked, "How can you tell a Christian from anybody else?" There were all these people running around having religious experiences and saying that they were experiences of the Resurrected Christ. How can you tell who has the Spirit of Christ and who is faking it? And John's answer in the Epistle is a classic application of the teaching of Jesus. "Not those who say, Lord, Lord, but those who do the will of my Heavenly Father are My disciples." Yes, "By their fruits ye shall know them."

So listen to I John once again,

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us".

Then you skip down to the 20th verse and he says,

"If any one says, 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

Well, I don't think it can be put any more simply. If you've experienced the Resurrection in your life, your life will provide the evidence. If you say that you love God and you hate somebody, then you're a liar. That's clear enough. But it raises obvious problems. I came across these lines the other day:

"Love thy neighbor,
That is fine
For you perhaps -
But just try mine."

Why can't we just love God and let our neighbors take care of themselves? Why can't we just have that wonderful feeling of God's grace in our lives that give us peace? Why can't we just have the knowledge that God takes care of us and assume that he's taking care of everybody else? Isn't that enough?

And John replies that only is that not enough, it's not even Christian. The test is love of your neighbor, and if you say you have the experience of the Resurrected Christ in your heart, but do not love, then you don't have the experience of the resurrected Christ. Because the only evidence worthy of Christ is Christlike love. Everything else can be faked. But the love we saw in Him can come only from Him.

So we come to the heart of it. If he's resurrected, then Christians ought to look like it. They ought to be happy. They ought to be optimistic. They ought to be joyful - that's true. But that's only half of it. It ought to make a difference in their disposition, but also it should make a difference in their deeds. They ought to act the way Christ would have acted.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

Let me illustrate. On August 10th, 1976 in the north of Ireland, an IRA gang of terrorists made a strike on a city and were speeding away in their car when the British troops opened fire. They hit the driver of the car. The car careened out of control and killed three small children, the maguire children - all three in the same family.

On August 11th, the next day, a young housewife named Betty Williams stood up and said, "I've had enough". She got TV and press coverage and said that it was time that the violence between Catholics and Protestants that is tearing that beautiful land apart should end. She asked all who wanted to do something about it to attend a rally on the 14th of August, the day after the burial of those three children. On that day, August 14th, 1976, a date that ought to be remembered, for the first time in North of Ireland, Roman Catholics and Protestants, came together and planned for peace. The Irish Women for Peace was organized through Betty Williams, a Roman Catholic, and Mairead Corrigan, a Protestant.

In an interview Betty Williams said something that to me has the ring of the authentic reasoning of I John. She said:

"There is no use sitting here and saying I believe in God and I believe in peace. You have to go out and do something about it. You have to get others to believe in God and to believe in peace."

And then she said:

"If you can get just a little bit of faith into their hearts, the rest follows easily...."

"A little bit of faith into their hearts...." I John makes it as simple as that. If you say you love God, if you have faith in your heart, you will love your neighbor...it follows easily. Your actions are evidence of the faith that is there in you. For if Christ is risen indeed, then He is Lord in your life.

PRAYER We thank Thee, O God, for the life and death of Jesus - for His presence with us now. Make us sensitive to it. Help us to see Him more clearly, then to follow Him more nearly, to love Him more dearly - that His risen life may be in us, and as we die to the little things of the world, may we live with Him in light, in love and in all of life.

For we ask these things in the spirit of Jesus who on this day was raised from death to new life. Help us to share fully and completely in that life. In His name we pray. Amen