

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

April 17, 2022 (Resurrection of Our Lord, Year C)
Luke 24:1-12

A few generations ago, back when Russia was called the Soviet Union, a communist superpower, its official religion was atheism—the belief that there is NO God. The USSR was the DEFINITION of a secular state. But after the death of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, then VICE President, George Bush represented the U.S. at the funeral, and he was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow.

She stood motionless by the coffin until SECONDS before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that probably ranks as one of the most PROFOUND acts of civil disobedience ever committed: She reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest.

There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it ALL hoped that her husband was WRONG. She hoped that there was ANOTHER life, and that life was BEST represented by Jesus who died on the cross, and that the same RISEN Jesus might yet have MERCY on her husband.

The world argues that Easter is irrelevant, meaningless. But despite all their arguments, WE know that the resurrection of our Lord is a fact; it's the most important and profound event in the history of the world. It's the center of our lives and our faith, because nothing else makes any SENSE without it.

And yet, we come to the tomb this morning with our OWN questions and doubts and confusions. They've been with us since that FIRST Easter. When Mary Magdalene and other women found the stone rolled away from the tomb, they were PERPLEXED. They didn't know what to make of it. What did it mean?

They go and tell the disciples about seeing two angels and being told that Jesus had risen. Of COURSE, they would go to the eleven – they were the ones, of ALL people, who should know. They had been with Jesus from the BEGINNING. They'd HEARD Jesus say AGAIN and AGAIN, as the angels REMINDED the women, “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day RISE AGAIN.” The disciples were in the BEST position to KNOW that what the women said they had seen and heard was TRUE. “BUT,” it says, “these words seemed to them an IDLE tale, and they did NOT believe them.” Even PETER didn't believe it until he SAW it for HIMSELF.

That's the question we're STILL asking: IS it an idle tale? Is it to be BELIEVED?
A few years back, Luther Seminary created this video. You might remember it.

Watch the video “Easter is Coming.”

Easter is HERE! Easter is NOW! The testimony of the women at the tomb IS true. Easter HAS come. And our Lord's rising from the dead CHANGES EVERYTHING.

I love how that video suddenly stops and reverses and CHALLENGES all those objections, because Easter turns EVERYTHING on its head.

Some years ago, a college student came by his pastor's office to discuss theological issues. That sort of thing doesn't happen very often, so the pastor was HAPPY to meet with him. Eventually the conversation came around to the subject of Easter. After all, if you take Christianity seriously, it will eventually ALWAYS lead you to Easter. “What do you think of the resurrection?” he asked.

The pastor replied: “I believe that it happened in REALITY and not just in people's minds.”
“What's your evidence?” the young man asked, like a professor prodding a student.

The pastor presented as Exhibit A: the disciples. All twelve were KILLED for believing and PROCLAIMING to their DYING breath that Jesus was Lord and was RESURRECTED. He said, "TWELVE men are not going to give up their lives to simply PERPETUATE what they know to be a HOAX." It HAD to be the truth.

The student could only mumble, " I just don't know." And that was his problem. Faith TRUSTS in something that CANNOT be PROVEN. It HOPES in something that is BEYOND believing. It clings to something that is IMPOSSIBLE. And yet it knows...it just KNOWS, that some things are TRUE, whether you BELIEVE them or not.

Easter is ABOUT hard times. It happened in the MIDST of things that were difficult to understand. Many people have asked me why Jesus said, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" He called out to God PRECISELY because that's how WE feel—God-forsaken. The REASON Jesus BECAME human was so he could feel and suffer EVERYTHING that we do—all our pain, all our loneliness, all our weakness—so that he could take it ALL on himself, and then take it to the GRAVE WITH him.

But now that grave is OPEN. The stone's been rolled away. The tomb is empty. The angels say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here"

The darkness has passed. Morning has broken and now we can SEE. Now we can see that Jesus has INDEED risen from the dead. He defeated death. No, he DESTROYED death. And everything of ours that he took to the grave WITH him, he LEFT there. He BURIED it. He buried DEATH, and gave US life. He opened the way to ETERNAL life. And that makes THIS life, THIS life, SO much more.

Easter means that you are forgiven. You are free to BE, to be the child of God you were created to be, to be peaceful, to be hopeful, to be graceful, to be purposeful, to be real, to be loving. You are free to not MERELY EXIST, but to LIVE, to TRULY LIVE, to live life to the FULLEST.

This is what Easter MEANS. The world may call it MEANING-LESS, but to WE who BELIEVE, Easter means EVERYTHING.

And so at Easter, we DEFY the powers of THIS world, and WE SHOUT: "CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!" Amen.