

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

It was glorious last week, wasn't it? Nearly 80 people in our little facility—and it was...glorious! The sweet fragrance of the Easter lilies and warm sunshine from outside filled the room. Then the singing and the proclaiming! "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" and "I Know that My Redeemer Lives"; "Alleluia" and "**Christ is risen!—He is risen indeed!**" What a glorious day filled with the proclamation and praises of our living Savior Jesus Christ!

What an awesome day to celebrate his resurrection victory for us, but where's the proof? With the world returning back to normal and the Easter excitement settling down, questions arise about what it is we're really celebrating. Where's your proof of the resurrection? Where's your proof of all those blessings that come with the resurrection? At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of a baby, which happens every day. On Good Friday, we remember a death, which also happens every day, but Easter Sunday? On that day, we celebrate something that none of us has ever seen or experienced, something that defies human logic and reason.

So where's your proof? Skeptics love to jump on that question when it comes to the resurrection. So you end up hearing all kinds of theories like the disciples hallucinated it or they stole his body or Jesus really wasn't dead or it's just a legend that grew out of proportion.

Yet it isn't just atheist or secular skeptics who demand proof. One of Jesus' own disciples demanded physical proof of the risen Jesus. Thomas was so skeptical about Jesus' resurrection from the dead. "**Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.**" (John 20:25) Yes, most of the disciples had seen Jesus in the flesh, had touched his scars, and even ate with him, but Thomas had not. With a heart full of grief and a head full of doubt, Thomas wasn't about to compromise himself by listening to the reports of a bunch of confused women and disciples working through their own Good Friday grief.

Then a week later, Jesus appeared again to his disciples behind locked doors—and gave Thomas all the proof he needed. "**Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.**" (John 20:27) After Thomas acknowledged that Jesus was his living Lord and God, Jesus rebuked his skepticism. "**Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**" (John 20:29) Like so many of us, Thomas wanted proof, but Jesus didn't call him blessed. He called you and me "**blessed**"—not because we're so great, not because we did all the work of coming to faith, but because we "**have not seen and yet have believed**" in him.

...But how do we get there? How do we believe in One whom we have not seen? None of us has seen anyone raised from the dead—and if you haven't seen that, then there are other questions you might have. How do I know Jesus is God and Lord of all? How do I know that I have peace with God? How do I know that my sin and guilt is forgiven? Where's the proof?

Now skeptics and opponents of God's Word will tell you that it was all a legend conjured up by Jesus' disciples that exploded into something bigger than they intended, that it never really happened, and that we shouldn't be concerned about such foolishness. All we have is this life. So live it because death is coming. Yet that's not how our God speaks in his Word. In fact, what he reveals in his Word is no myth conjured up by grieving disciples.

You see, when Jesus blessed "**those who have not seen and yet have believed**", he knew how difficult that would be for everyone not in that room with him. He knew there were countless souls out there alive and yet to be born, who didn't know about him and who would not see him as the apostles did that week after Easter. In a very real sense, Jesus was thinking of you and me. So forty days later before ascending into heaven, Jesus told his disciples, "**...You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**" (Acts 1:8)

"**Witnesses**"? Why would Jesus need witnesses? Isn't he the almighty God? Isn't he the Lord of heaven and earth for whom nothing is impossible? At the very least, why not send angels to do this difficult work? ...But that's not what Jesus wanted. Instead, he chose to entrust the testimony of his life, death, and resurrection, of his divinity and peace and forgiveness to the fumbling, stumbling lips of his followers. Yes, those guys. Remember what they did? They panicked and abandoned Jesus in his hour of need. They publicly denied him and privately doubted him.

Yet Jesus sent them to be his witnesses **“to the ends of the earth.”** They had witnessed his life, his miracles over demons and disease and death. They had listened to his teaching, and then he died the humiliating death of a criminal. Yet they also saw him alive—not a phantom, but real flesh and blood. They even ate and drank with him after his resurrection, and then he sent them out to preach and testify about him. They were to be the proof of his resurrection, of his forgiveness, of his peace.

That’s how we find the Apostle Peter in a room full of Greeks. Those Greeks were aware of the Old Testament and its promises of a Messiah who would come to bring peace between God and humanity. They had heard of Jesus Christ who had done great things and who had taught **“the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace”** through him, but they didn’t know the whole story. Like countless other Gentiles, they didn’t know why Jesus had come or what he had done. So the Lord in his mercy took the good news of Jesus across cultures through the Apostle Peter to testify to them as a witness about Jesus.

Peter didn’t try to convince them or argue them into believing that Jesus is God or that Jesus rose from the dead. He simply did what witnesses are expected to do. He testified to what he had seen and heard—the perfect life, humiliating death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. **“We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”** Peter testified that this Jesus was a real person who had lived and served **“in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem”**. He testified that this Jesus had indeed died by crucifixion—the humiliating death of a criminal, which indicated that he was under the curse of God’s wrath.

Then he testified about the resurrection. **“God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.”** It wasn’t to everybody. Read the resurrection accounts in the Gospels and you’ll quickly see that there were many who clearly rejected Jesus and his resurrection. The high priest and the religious leaders even paid off the Roman soldiers, who had seen the empty tomb, to spread the lie that his body was stolen. Many had rejected Jesus before he died, so he revealed himself to his chosen ones.

...But even they weren’t a small number. Jesus allowed himself to be seen by witnesses. Not just one or two or ten, but many. There were the women and Mary Magdalene. There was Peter and the Twelve, including skeptical Thomas. The Apostle Paul tells us, **“After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time...Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me...”** (1 Corinthians 15:6-8)

Jesus had you and me in mind when he made those appearances. That’s why he commanded Peter and the other apostles **“to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.”** All these witnesses gladly and boldly testified to the living Jesus with their lives even to the point of giving up those lives in death. In so doing, they were witnesses of Christ’s resurrection for us!

All that visible proof is wonderful and necessary for us **“who have not seen and yet have believed”**, but what about the believing? What about the peace and forgiveness and life that is supposed to be ours?

You see, the visible proof is helpful, but **“faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see”** (Hebrews 11:1). Peter and the other witnesses were not just tasked with sharing facts, but with proclaiming what Jesus’ resurrection victory means for you and me right now.

Instead of trying to convince his hearers and us of what we do not see, Peter went back to the Scriptures, back to the Word of God. **“All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”** The prophets didn’t get to see Jesus in the flesh either. They certainly wanted to do so, but they were witnesses just as much as the apostles because they testified of the One who was to come. They testified that there is forgiveness through faith in this Jesus, about whom all Scripture testifies. There is peace with God **“through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all”**. There is life through Jesus.

Your naturally skeptical heart doesn’t want to hear and believe that when the guilt of the sins of your past or of those familiar sins of weakness screams in your ear to doubt Jesus and his ability to forgive your sins, to doubt his ability to overcome your guilt with forgiveness, to doubt the fact that he took the burden of your guilt on his own shoulders on the cross and was buried with that guilt in the tomb you deserve. Yet the witness of the

reality of the risen Jesus shouts loudly and clearly from the pages of Holy Scripture, “The tomb is empty! He is not here. ***Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!***”

You want proof of your forgiveness? Turn to the pages of Holy Scripture and listen to the witnesses who tell you how Jesus forgave even the most undeserving scoundrels and sinners. Then see how he forgives you and me with his blood and with his life, as he cleanses you through the waters of Holy Baptism and gives you himself in bread and wine in his Holy Supper.

You want proof of peace with God? Turn to the pages of Holy Scripture and listen to the witnesses who tell you how Jesus calmed their troubled hearts with his grace and mercy. Then see how he calms your troubled heart with grace and mercy too.

You want proof that Jesus is God and Lord of all? Turn to the pages of Holy Scripture and listen to the witnesses who tell you how he didn’t come down from the cross, how he abandoned his tomb, and how he gives what only God can give just as he promised—and then gives those blessings to you.

Now in the end, you can’t reason that out. You can’t make it fit with human logic, but with a heart changed by faith in Jesus, with a mind changed by trust in the living Savior, you can see that Jesus wasn’t just another man who died on a cross and was buried in a tomb in ancient Israel. No, he is your living Savior. He is your living Lord. He is your God, who has given you the victory, and he always will be. You can be confident that you have forgiveness through faith in Jesus because ***Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!*** Alleluia! Amen.