

Verify, But Trust
Easter Sunday
April 4, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 24:1-25

As some of you know, my first profession was in journalism. Even before I'd finished college, I became well aware of how important one quality is to success as a journalist. It wasn't necessarily the ability to write well and fast, or to interview people or to understand how the halls of government worked. The quality that was essential was skepticism.

I had a favorite journalism professor who said to his students almost every day, "Just remember, people are no darn good." Except he didn't say darn. Then, when I was on the job, there was always the hard-bitten editor type who would say, "If your mother says she loves you, kid, you still better check it out."

We live in a skeptical world – not just person to person, but nation to nation. I recently heard an interview with a Russian government official about the latest round of nuclear arms agreements between the U.S. and Russia. The official was recalling the days when Ronald Reagan was our president.

As Reagan negotiated multiple arms treaties toward end of the Cold War, he cleverly borrowed a Russian proverb "*Doveryai, no proveryai.*" It meant "Trust, but verify." Reagan's point was that the U.S. should work to be in relationship with the Russians and to reduce nuclear arms. That didn't mean, however, we should take the Russians' word for how many warheads they had destroyed. Instead, Reagan's policy was that we'd go in and count them ourselves. "Trust, but verify."

In the interview I heard last week, the Russian official recalled that phrase as he tried to describe the Russians' desires for recent arms reductions negotiations with the Obama administration. We would prefer it, he said, if America took a slightly different approach than the Reagan years. Instead of "Trust, but verify" he said, why not "verify, but trust." With the Cold War over, he said, the two nations might dwell more on the trust and less on the skeptical push to prove things for ourselves.

What in the world does all that have to do with Easter, you may be asking.

The answer, I would propose, connects to how we understand Easter and relate our faith to an increasingly skeptical, cynical world ... a world that insists on verification when the life of faith asks us to trust, to trust in something that is larger than ourselves.

As I re-read the gospel accounts of the first Easter morning, it struck me that the disciples' initial reaction to news of the resurrection of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ was more about verification than trust.

Matthew used the short but sufficient phrase to describe how some of the disciples' reacted upon seeing the resurrected Christ. "Some doubted." Both Mark and Luke tell a part of the story that reminds us that women get the short end of the deal all too often in scripture. Luke reports that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna and some other women took spices to the tomb to prepare Christ's body for burial. After hearing the angels' explanation of the resurrection, they ran to tell the apostles the glorious news.

"But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them," Luke writes about the reaction of the men. For all of us, but especially for women, the story seems to stop and go "thud" there in verse eleven of Luke's 24th chapter. Not until Peter had verified the facts in the next verse does the story seem to move on to Christ's post-resurrection appearances.

Even though Christ had foretold his death and resurrection, the disciples didn't believe. Maybe they forgot. Maybe they were so dumbstruck they just didn't have the capacity to comprehend the news. Those are all plausible explanations, I suppose. Or, maybe this is just another reflection of the fact that men assembled the Bible in a male-dominated society.

But, the Bible is the inspired word of God. As such, it's not lost on women that the two Marys and their female friends were the first to hear the news of the risen Christ. Perhaps the news simply couldn't be trusted to men. Today, somewhere, perhaps, the two Marys and their friends are looking in on our worship here at Caldwell, and taking note that three of the four youth who have just joined Caldwell church are young women. And perhaps they are breathing a sigh of relief.

Either way, the truth is that those young women and their generation will inherit the church at a time when America will be more religiously pluralistic than ever. Christianity still defines our nation, but more and more experts are asking whether America might be on the same path as Europe, where the church has experienced a steady and dramatic decline over the last century.

As with so many things in America, religion is an increasingly individualistic realm. People arrive at their own definition of God. In many cases they distrust the large institutional church. They also see reasons to question the church. We saw that this week when the news was full of headlines about death threats, planned terrorist attacks and sentencing for the murder of an abortion doctor – all acts done in the name of the church.

In other cases, people want their own proof rather than buying in to an established way of believing, even if it's been good enough for centuries.

Two of the fastest growing segments in religious America are attracting more and more media interest. The first is the so-called “nones” – people who consider themselves religious but are not loyal to any one tradition. Not Baptists, not Methodists, Catholics, Pentecostals or Presbyterians. None of them. The second group has been labeled “spiritualists,” those who see themselves as spiritual, as having a connection to the almighty, but don't think of themselves as religious.

All of this seems so poignant on Easter, a day when millions upon millions of people gather to celebrate a story that skeptics love to question. Our tradition in all of its denominational forms is, after all, so largely defined by the events of Holy Week. Skeptics hear the story about a man, purportedly fully human and fully divine, who dies an agonizing death, is placed in a sealed tomb that is guarded around the clock and, yet, three days later, is found empty. The skeptics say: So, prove it. If you are hanging your entire faith on this claim of resurrection, prove to me that Jesus was resurrected.

Did it really happen? Dozens – maybe hundreds - of books and essays have been written to argue both sides. Last year, I came across a little book on sale for \$2.99 by Lee Strobel, an investigative reporter and self-affirming atheist. After hearing the story of Christ his entire life, he decided to investigate it all for himself.

He circled the globe talking to experts – about what actually happens to the heart and lungs of a person being crucified. He looked into claims that the women might have gone to the wrong tomb. And, one by one, he played out alternative explanations of the many stories of Christ's post-resurrection appearances. After all the investigation, he became a Christian.

At the very least, Christ's resurrection has never been disproven. But the proof doesn't hinge on the location of a body. The truth we claim is larger than that. A few years ago, two highly regarded religious scholars with very different perspectives wrote a book together about how they see the truth.

N.T. “Tom” Wright provides this helpful background:

Other prophets and other messiahs came and went in Jesus’ day. Routinely, they died violently at the hands of the pagan enemy. Their movements either died with them, sometimes literally, or transformed themselves into a new movement around a new leader. Jesus’ movement did neither. Within days of his execution it found a new lease of life; within weeks it was announcing that he was indeed the messiah; within a year or two it was proclaiming him to pagans as their rightful Lord. How can an historian explain this astonishing transformation?¹

From there, Wright analyzed the text and historical events and came to the conclusion that it is far more difficult to explain away the resurrection than it is to acknowledge that, at the very least, something remarkable happened to Christ’s body on that first day of the week after his cruel execution.

His co-author, Marcus Borg, known for his high degree of skepticism, came to a different conclusion about what happened to Christ’s body. Like other skeptics who have promoted the same theory, Borg writes that Christ was resuscitated, not resurrected. This line of thought holds that Christ never died, but collapsed on the cross and later was somehow revived by the cool air of the tomb.

This version of the story of the first Easter point to a different historical conclusion, Borg maintains. Still, Borg says, this version of the story doesn’t undermine the faith, because Easter is about a larger truth.

“It doesn’t matter,” Borg writes, “because Easter is about resurrection, not resuscitation.”²

Personally, I side with the resurrection believers. Each of you must come to your own conclusion. But, given the fact that you came here today, surely we can all agree with Wright *and* Borg – that Easter is about hope. Wright notes that relying on science must come with the recognition that science observes what normally happens – and something abnormal happened that morning at the empty tomb, something that was part of a much larger abnormality.

The meaning of Easter points to the truth of the messiah – the son of God came into the world and died to open a new age, an age of hope that cannot be quenched. Easter, says Wright, “was the first day of God’s new week, the moment of sunrise after the long

¹ The Meaning of Jesus, Chapter 7 by N.T. Wright, p 112.

² Ibid. p.131

night, the time of new meetings, new meals, of reconciliation and commissioning. It was the beginning of the new creation.”³

That much can be trusted and that much can be verified in the history of the church that sprang from the tomb, including the church that escaped death and rose in a new and wondrous form here at the corner of Fifth and Park.

It matters how Jesus died and was resurrected. But it also matters how Jesus lived and it matters how we live in the hope that we have in Christ. Jesus comforted the afflicted and sometimes afflicted the comfortable. Jesus dined and spent time with the outcast, the poor, the sick and the dying as well as the affluent and powerful. Jesus affirmed right living in others and called the powers that be to account when they were misusing their influence. All that is about how he lived ... and how we are called to live.

If the church in America is to live on, it is important how we live. That is how we will enable others, even the skeptics, to trust rather than trying to verify our claims. Words can only go so far – and it won't be far at all with atheists and agnostics, or even nones and spiritualists. In the end, words are spoken but they can't verify anything.

People trust what they can see. The two Marys and their female friends saw the angels and the empty tomb, so they believed. The apostles didn't believe until they saw. We cannot take the world back to that first Easter morning, show the world the empty tomb and then ask it to trust us.

But we can be the body of Christ. We can carry out verifiable acts of grace, hope and reconciliation. We can demonstrate verifiable compassion and healing. We can work for justice. We can work out our faith in our daily living. And in these verifiable acts, we can encourage others to trust in the resurrected Christ and know the joy and the wonder of Easter hope.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Ibid p. 126

