

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 4:8-12; 1 John 1:1-2:2; Luke 24:36-49
Understanding the Scriptures

Lots of men die. Even great men die. Aristotle died. Alexander the Great died. Caesar died. Washington died. Lincoln died. Everyone dies, many even at the hands of others, even great men.

Religious leaders die. Hindu holy men have died. Mohammed died. Buddha died. Confucius died. Religious leaders die as well. Not all are crucified. Good luck getting a cross that can hold Buddha. Some die peacefully, some go down kicking and screaming, some die in disgrace, but religious leaders die as well.

At the end of America's Most Wanted there is a memorial for a fallen civil servant and during it they say something along these lines, "It is not how these men died that made them heroes, but how they lived." It is rare to celebrate the death of a great man. Many remember death, but do not celebrate it. Islam celebrates the deaths of its enemies. Other religions mourn the death of those they hold dear. Only Christianity celebrates the death of its own, especially the death of those who died in disgrace for their faith. Our martyrs are not those who die while killing others. Our martyrs die at others' hands for their faith. Our God is not One who led us on conquest and in killing. Our God is one who died at others' hands, quite innocently, and in apparent humiliation.

You would think that we would want to hide this fact. You would think we would make up other fanciful tales about our God to somehow polish Him up for the world, to make Him more presentable. You'd think that the apostles would have tailored the message a bit after it ended in seeming disaster. Who wants to preach a crucifixion? Who wants to rest in the wounds of a murdered Savior?

Yet there we have St. Peter today, sticking to his guns, sticking to the message. The rulers that killed his Savior now demand an accounting from him. Surely the Church must have learned something by now. Surely the Church must have come up with a better answer. Did St. Peter have troops outside to exact revenge, to conquer the enemies of God and convert them by the sword? Nope. Same old story. *"It is by Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed."*

Ah! But St. Peter does add something there, doesn't he? Jesus did do something other great men and religious leaders have not done: He rose from the dead. No, He did not rise fable or myth style. He rose historically. St. John tells us he writes about the things he has heard, seen, touched. St. Luke recalls Jesus' actual appearance to the disciples, that He ate a fish to prove His bodily resurrection, that He bid His disciples to touch Him, that He proved this was what was foretold all along from actual texts in actual books written hundreds, even a thousand years earlier. The Passion history gives us the names of real leaders, real places, and real seasons of the Church Year. This is not some vague unsubstantiated legend. No, Christ's resurrection, like His death, is fact.

Some would pretend that it is faith that makes all this fact, that we must believe in spite of all the proof, that we must somehow refuse to look at the evidence. No, faith does not make the death and resurrection of our Lord fact. Faith simply acknowledges what is already true. Faith correctly judges the evidence. Two plus two is four. I don't have to believe it for it to be true. It is true. The fact that I acknowledge it does nothing to add credence to the fact. Rather, the fact that I acknowledge it allows the fact to benefit me. It makes me less of a fool. The only one hurt if I deny the truth of math is me, when I am shortchanged and unemployed. The truth remains the truth. So also with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fact that I acknowledge it does not make it true. It makes me less of a fool. The only one hurt when I deny the truth of the death and resurrection of Christ is me, when I am condemned and unforgiven.

But, one might say, many pious men read the Scriptures and yet deny the resurrection. Surely there must be a reason such learned men would deny this event. Sure, there is a reason: they do not

know how to read the Scriptures. After the disciples got over the shock and fear that came with Jesus appearance—after all, its not every day one sees a dead man walking—Jesus told them why they shouldn't have been shocked and afraid. St. Luke records, *“He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’”*

I believe I told you the story of the professor from one of our colleges who was invited to speak at the University of Minnesota once. The topic of Jonah came up and one of the so-called scholars there began to mock him. “You mean you actually believe that Jonah was swallowed by a giant fish?” the man laughed. “Yes,” our professor answered. “Well how did he survive in there?” the mocker continued. “I’ll ask him when I get to heaven,” our professor replied, undeterred. “What if he’s not there,” the other professor asked. “Well, then, you ask him,” was our professor’s reply.

The Bible is a book about Jesus and His death and resurrection. The account of Jonah, Jesus says, is a foreshadowing of His resurrection. It is not foolishness. It is fact. It may be unexplainable, but that doesn't mean it is not true. Many of us cannot explain the theory of gravity in detail, but I don't see us jumping off the gym roof as a result. As Jonah actually survived after three days in the belly of a whale, so also Jesus would rise after three days in the belly of the earth. The Bible is a book about Jesus.

When the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus one day, as was their custom, Jesus blew their trap to smithereens, as was His custom, in the following way. St. John records: *“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”* The Pharisees may have been reading the Scriptures, but they weren't reading them right, because they weren't reading them to meet Jesus, to know Jesus, to find forgiveness in Jesus. The Bible is a book about Jesus.

It's amazing the things kids learn. Maggie and Nicholas are hardly scholars—in fact they can't read—but they already read the Scriptures better than most so-called Bible authorities. They each have little pocked Bibles that we picked up somewhere that they use for the little worship services they have at home. My mom told me last week that when the kids were down there she caught Maggie giving Nicholas communion, quite reverently, with crackers and water. One day I'll have explain that no one is to administer the Sacrament without a proper call to them, but, for the most part, they already know how to preach and teach quite well. Normally Nicholas preaches, often wearing a tie, while Maggie listens, because, as Maggie says, boys preach. Whenever they dig into the Scriptures together, I hear the same word over and over again. It's all about Jesus for them. They know how to read the Bible already, and they can't even read.

St. Luke records: *“Then he opened their minds so they could understand the **Scriptures**. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’”*

Sometimes when I'm feeling particularly picky I'll get a rise out of people when they ask if I believe in sex before marriage. “Yes,” I reply, “I most certainly do.” The person asking then almost always look at me like I've gone off my rocker, but the fact is that I do believe in sex before marriage, that is, I know that it happens. People have confessed it to me. Television celebrates it. It does most certainly happen that some people have sex before marriage. I don't agree with their decision, and God condemns it, but it happens nonetheless. The question is a bad question because it misuses the word believe. The question would be better asked, “Do you agree with sex before marriage?” I believe in sex before marriage because it has happened. I believe in the resurrection for the same reason. It is a fact.

The church father Tertullian in *His Prescription against Heretics*—the Church could sure use a prescription like that today—was once in a debate with a Greek thinker who attacked the Church and the idea of a crucified and risen God. It was foolishness to him. But, as Tertullian contended, a

fact may seem foolish, but it is nonetheless fact. In fact, the fact that the gospel seems absurd is proof that no man could have thought it up, that God must have revealed it, since it is so different than the work-righteous paths man-made religion inevitably devises. It seems foolish to me that Canada is the first country south of Detroit, but it is fact. It seems foolish to me that people can float about in space like the do, but it is fact. It seems foolish to me that one little bomb can wipe out a country, but it is fact. It may seem foolish to someone that Christ died and rose, but it is fact.

In that debate with the Greek thinker who denied Christian truth, Tertullian wrote: "*The Scriptures belong to the Church.*" Why do the Scriptures belong to the Church? Why can Maggie and Nicholas, though illiterate, read Scripture better than unbelieving PhDs? Because the Church alone knows how to read them, finding Christ everywhere in them. How do the Scriptures then become one's own? When one becomes a member of the Church, when one learns that one does not read the Scriptures to discover their own truth, but that one reads the Scriptures because they are truth and that the Truth is at their center. Heretics, Tertullian says, are not to argue their heresy from the Scriptures because the Scriptures do not belong to them because they do not yet belong to Christ. If you don't know Christ, you can't understand the Scriptures. If you don't understand the Scriptures, you can't know Christ.

Great men die. Religious leaders die. But their deaths are not celebrated. But Christ's death is. It is preached. It is praised. It is remembered in the Sacrament. Great men who die, religious leaders who die, stay dead, but not Christ. He rose. He lives. He is crucified yet living, bearing His wounds not in shame, but in victory. While America's Most Wanted makes a nice point when it remembers its fallen heroes, it does not apply to Christ. It is not only how He lived that makes Him a hero. It is how He died. And it is not just how He lived and died that makes Christ a hero. It is how he lived, died, and lives again. Believe it, not in spite of the evidence, but because of the evidence. Believe it, not to make it true, but because it is true. Believe it because faith receives its benefits, so that your death can one day be celebrated, so that you too can also rise to live eternally, victorious over sin, death, and hell. Believe it, because "*salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*" Amen.