

The Resurrection of Our Lord - Easter Day

April 21, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. **2** By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. **3** For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. **6** After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, **8** and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. **9** For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. **10** But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. **11** Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. (NIV2011)

“Face the Unknown with Joy in Jesus”

Christ is risen; He is risen indeed!

Bartholomeu Dias might not be a household name. But among sailors and explorers in the age when Europeans were trying to branch out and increase their understanding of the world beyond their familiar borders, Dias achieved something of immense importance. During the 1400s Europeans decided they would find a route by sea to reach the East. But that wasn't as easy as it might sound. Up until the middle of the 1400s, the Western coast of Africa had gradually been explored and mapped by Europeans. But they didn't know what they didn't know. Many maps that attempted to speculate about the lands too far away from Europe simply labeled the area the Unknown. The Unknown was that vast area beyond what had been explored by Europeans. And there were so many discouraging theories floating around about the Unknown. That the ocean water boiled the farther south you went and burned people's skin. That the sea actually became poisonous. That the seas were inhabited by sea creatures or dragons.

So Bartholomeu Dias set sail from Portugal in August of 1487 into the vast Unknown. For the first part of his expedition, his ships hugged the coastline of Africa, keeping land in sight. Then, as his ships neared the mouth of the Congo River, a huge storm sent them out to sea. For thirteen days the storm raged, driving them farther and farther into the Unknown. Without access to the sun during the daytime or stars at night, the sailors found themselves in cold and stormy waters. When the storm finally ended, there was no land anywhere in sight. So Dias set their course due east. Still no land. So he ordered the ships to head north. Finally, in February of 1488 they spotted a small bump of land on the horizon.

When they studied the shoreline, they realized they had gone past the southern tip of Africa. They were on the eastern side, sailing in the waters of the Indian Ocean.

Dias took this as a good sign and decided to continue on to India. But his crew was determined to return home and threatened to mutiny. Bartholomew Dias never reached India. So we could say his expedition was a failure. But he proved to Europeans that ships could sail around the tip of Africa without falling off the edge of the earth. When he returned home in December 1488 he gave that point at the bottom of Africa the name that best described what had happened there: The Cape of Storms.

Facing the unknown is never an easy task. You can gather as much information about what you know as possible. You can make educated guesses about what you will find once you pass the point of what is known. Then you will need to rely on some carefully formulated theories and put confidence in plans you have made. But God wants you to sail through life with confidence in Him. On this Easter Sunday morning, we get to celebrate the good news of Jesus that rests on the reality of the Resurrection. God wants us to face the unknown with joy in Jesus.

As the Apostle Paul starts off the fifteenth chapter in 1 Corinthians, he wants to address the unknown head on. He goes over the basics of the Christian faith. He says: **“Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.”** (1 Corinthians 15:1) He wants to call our attention to the foundational truths of the good news in Jesus. When we have a better grasp on key truths of who Jesus and what Jesus did, we will be better equipped to handle the unknown.

Some unknowns aren't as important as others. It might be a major milestone in history to uncover what lies on the other side of the ocean. Just like photographs of a black hole might grab headlines around the world. But those kinds of discoveries might not have much of an impact on you personally. We have other kinds of uncertainty and confusion that preoccupy our lives. Take, for example, the future of San Juan Generating Station. For people in our community, it isn't just about getting electricity from burning coal. It's about people. It's about jobs. It's about a tax base for local schools. It's about how much more I'm going to pay for all sorts of things if the plant goes away.

The Apostle Paul wants us to know that some things are personally meaningful to you. It's worth our time to uncover answers for big issues like life and death that confront every human being. Here's how he frames the stakes for understanding the gospel: **“By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.”** (1 Corinthians 15:2)

See, we like to have control over what we choose to believe. We spend so much of the rest of our lives being told what we have to do. We like to retain some power over those most important aspects in life. So when it comes to what happened to Jesus and what it means for me, I want to be the one who decided what is true and what it means to me, thank you very much.

After all, when it comes to the end of life and life after death, is it really possible to know anything for sure? I can do what those ancient sailors did and stick to what I do know from my own past and my own experiences. Believing what someone else tells me has gotten me into trouble before. Some of the way supposed Christians have treated me with judgment and criticism makes me doubt anything else they say. Some Christians insist on their opinions and put them on the same level as biblical issues. Sometimes I feel like I have to travel back to fantasy land to accept so much of what people of faith are pushing.

In the end, isn't the most important thing that you can find some sort of inspiration from religion? Isn't Jesus mainly about teaching us to be better people and lead more fulfilling lives? If someone can find inspiration to overcome life's obstacles, isn't that the most important thing? The important thing is that you believe in something whether everyone else agrees with you or not. If you have a plan, if you've forged a spiritual path for yourself and Jesus can help, that's great. A victorious and resurrected Jesus can help you reach your life goals and achieve what you want from life.

When I'm faced with serious unknowns in life, I tend to retreat into my own reality. We all do. But when we are skeptical about knowing anything with 100% absolute certainty, we are left to deal with our own doubt and confusion all on our own. A smorgasbord approach to God's truth will only leave us with fear to face the unknown. No certainty means no security with no guarantee of any joy. Those superstitious ancients might look at us sideways wondering why we base our beliefs on such a shaky foundation.

Paul goes back to the basics. He summarizes the Christian message like this: **“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.”** (1 Corinthians 15:3-5) For Paul, faith wasn't merely personal. He wasn't satisfied with allowing it to rest on what he thought would work best. Faith rests on reality.

So he digs in even deeper. He cites the eyewitness appearances to Peter, also called Cephas, to the other apostles, a gathering of more than 500 disciples, James the half-brother of Jesus, and even Paul himself. All of these claims can be investigated. The facts can be verified. The Christian faith rests on the reality of the resurrection. Christ is risen; He is risen indeed!

Ultimately, Bartholomeu Dias was unsuccessful in his attempts to reach India from Europe by sea. But one thing he did accomplish was open up a world of possibilities for European explorers. Proving the fact that the ocean didn't drop off the edge of the earth on the other side of Africa allowed the navigators who came after him to keep sailing with confidence. No boiling oceans, no poisonous waters, no mythically-proportioned sea dragons to swallow up entire sea vessels meant the next fleet of ships had a new outlook on the unknown. They didn't know the exact path continuing east around Africa toward India, but at least there was an opportunity.

Less than ten years after Dias returned to Portugal, the next king was ready to send out an expedition that would resume where Dias and his sailors turned back toward home. In the summer of 1497 Vasco de Gama set out from Portugal with the mission of reaching India. The Portuguese kings had rejected the name Dias had given the southern most tip of Africa, Cape of Storms, and rechristened it Cape of Good Hope. And so, after Vasco de Gama battled through the storms at the rocky point constituting the dividing line between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, those four Portuguese sailing vessels eventually arrived in Calicut, India. That particular mission didn't enable de Gama to return home with gold or large amounts of spices. But it proved once for all that there was a sea route connecting Europe to Asia, bypassing the expensive Italian and Arab traders and eliminating the time-consuming overland route. It was a route that gave good hope.

What we know to be true about Jesus changes our outlook on life. We have good hope. We still have unresolved issues. We still face an uncertain future. No, God doesn't give us all the answers. But Paul points us to the fact of Jesus' death. If there was one thing the Romans were good at, it was executing criminals. The survival rate was nonexistent. Jesus was actually buried. His cold, lifeless body was placed in a tomb. He didn't fake it or pass out from exhaustion. He didn't just produce a hologram of himself on the cross and then disappear. But now he is risen. He was raised on Easter Sunday morning and remains risen still to this day. He didn't just produce visions for his followers. He came to them in a natural, though altered state. He ate food with them. He allowed his scars to be felt and his wounds to be touched.

Because he had certainty in the resurrection of Jesus, the Apostle Paul was willing to combat any error that denied it. To eliminate the resurrection of Jesus meant emptying the Christian faith of any meaning or purpose. Because he knew the reality of the resurrection, he was willing to toil tirelessly for the sake of the gospel. Paul didn't always know where his next mission expedition would lead him. He didn't have any guarantees of human success or even physical safety. But he pressed on. He labored to the point of exhaustion to make known the hope that exists because Jesus lives again. Christ is risen; He is Risen Indeed!

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane moments before his betrayal, he was deeply disturbed by the unknowns of the cross ahead of him. But he held onto the promises of God to courageously carry through. Because Jesus is risen, you don't face an unknowable fate. Because Jesus lives, you have something real to believe in. Because Jesus appeared to eyewitnesses who could verify his actual resurrected body, we have certainty. When you don't have control, God is in control. When you don't achieve your goals, God's goals are still yours in Jesus Christ. Your hope and joy is based on the reliable truth of Jesus' resurrection.

We live in a world in which so much is unknown and uncertain. Through all the clutter and all the distractions, one thing is guaranteed. You have good news in Jesus. Without guarantees for what will happen tomorrow or next week or next year, the good news of Jesus gives you one guarantee. Because Jesus rose and still lives, some day your grave will also be empty. You will live to be with Jesus. You have joy to accompany everything and every day life throws at you until that time. Face the unknown with joy in Jesus. Find joy in Jesus this Easter. Amen.