

The Truth of Easter

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is easy to get confused when you don't have the facts. One of the biggest causes of frustration and despair today is that we don't have the facts. Scientists are still discovering so much about how this virus works—how it spreads, and how it attacks our bodies. How can this coronavirus be fought? What is the best course for the future? We don't know. And that leads us to feel so unsettled, even depressed.

In our Gospel today, we meet two men who were caught in despair. Their hopes and dreams had been built on their Lord, Jesus; but all that had crumbled. Jesus had died—arrested and crucified. And now rumors were spreading all over Jerusalem about what may have happened to Jesus. It was all so confusing; they didn't know what to believe. And it was dragging them down.

And then a stranger showed up, starting walking with them. But this man had facts. Not only the facts of what had happened, he also had the explanation from the Scriptures of all that had taken place. And the truth he shared destroyed their uncertainty; the Holy Spirit filled them with faith.

Today we see how the Truth of Easter changes our lives. The Holy Spirit teaches us from the Bible, and he gives us certain hope.

It was Easter afternoon. Two of Jesus' followers had left Jerusalem, walking to the town of Emmaus, about seven miles away, talking about all the amazing things that had happened in the previous days. A man showed up. He walked beside them, and asked a simple question: "What are you discussing?"

Seems like a pretty innocuous question. But it hit a sore spot. The two men "**stood still, their faces downcast.**" They were sad. As they later explained, they were talking about Jesus, and "**we had hoped he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.**" But he had died.

They treated this stranger a little rudely. "**Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there?**" Lots of Jewish people had come to the capital city to celebrate the Passover near the Temple—and word had gotten around about Jesus.

They briefly told the stranger about Jesus. He was a prophet; he had done some amazing miracles. The chief priests had conspired against him and gotten him executed. And now, they said, it was the third day since his death—maybe they remembered Jesus' promise to rise on the third day; yet where was he? The rumor was that his tomb was empty; some women even claimed to see angels. But what was the truth?

It's so easy for us to forget the truth of Easter. Our hearts can be sad, our faces downcast, as we are weighed down by this world. We get perplexed by the troubles of life—why is this coronavirus wrecking such havoc on our world? As we sit with more time, we may feel guilt over things we did even years ago. We can have doubts as to whether God really is with us. Pretty soon we forget God's promises and his other teachings.

You know, those disciples on the road to Emmaus should have been strengthened by the reports they were hearing. Jesus' tomb was empty? The women saw angels who said he was alive? Wasn't this what they were hoping for? Instead, like Thomas, it was just too hard to believe.

And this is why this "stranger" just happened to be walking on the road. After giving them the chance to voice their concerns, he gently chastised them: **"How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all the prophets had spoken!"** They should have known better.

And then the stranger led them through a Bible class. **"Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures"** about Jesus.

You may not realize this, but there are over a thousand Old Testament verses that point ahead to what Jesus would do. The Old Testament was written from 1500 to 400 years before Jesus was born on this earth. Yet it contains so many details about the coming Savior's birth, his life, his death and his resurrection.

The Old Testament lists the place the Messiah would be born. It points to the time in history he'd be born. It states his family. It talks about how he would grow up. It points ahead to the miracles he would do.

As this stranger went through the prophecies, no doubt he would have mentioned Deuteronomy 18, which pointed to a prophet greater than Moses. He would have gone through Isaiah chapter 53, which talks about this suffering servant, who would commit no sin and yet be put to death as an innocent sacrifice—only to take his life up again. He would have gone through Psalms like Psalm 22, which details the words Jesus would speak from the cross: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" and the words the priests would say as they mocked him on his cross: "He trusts in the Lord, let the Lord rescue him." He could have pointed to prophecies of his bones not being broken and even of the 30 pieces of silver.

All these Old Testament prophecies are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Take them individually and they don't look like much; but put them together and they point to only one person. The one man who could save us because he is God himself.

The conclusion of the lesson was simple: **"Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"** All the opposition; the soldiers coming out to Gethsemane; the ridiculously unfair trials; the mocking; the agonizing death—it was all part of God's plan for how Jesus would save us from our sins. And it all led up to the truth that Jesus was alive.

God the Holy Spirit worked through this Bible class to fill these men with faith. This is how the Holy Spirit says he will always work—through the Word. The Gospel is God's power of salvation.

The lesson sure worked on those two men on the road. They said, **"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"** The lesson had opened the Scriptures—these men knew these prophecies, but in their despair they had forgotten them. Just like we so often forget God's promises when we get overwhelmed with concern. That's why we need to study the Bible again and again.

Now these men were overwhelmed with another emotion. I suppose they might have started by kicking themselves—how could they forget? But the Good News that Jesus had died for their sins and been raised for their justification assured them that they were forgiven.

Their hearts “burned” within them. This was not a made up emotion. You know, today, there are lots of people telling us to buck up, to pull together, we’ll get through this—and that can be helpful, even if it comes down to simple platitudes. But whatever hope we might feel from such slogans won’t last. Just telling yourself to feel better can’t last.

Our Christian hope is based on God’s Word. The Holy Spirit has revealed the truth to us. His law shows us our sin; and then his Gospel melts our cold hearts. The facts of Easter change everything for us.

Our life does not need to be bogged down with guilt; our Savior rose from death, proving that our sins were completely paid for. No matter what we hear on the news, our lives are not hopeless; as we heard last week, “*we have been born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*” We are not alone, not matter how we have to quarantine; our Savior lives and promises that he will be with us always. And we are not paralyzed by the fear of death, for Jesus said, “*Because I live, you also will live.*”

Those disciples arrived in Emmaus. They asked the stranger to stay with them. And as they ate dinner together, as he broke the bread, they suddenly recognized who this was: Jesus himself. He left them, and they then ran back to Jerusalem to tell the Apostles that they had seen Jesus and what he had said.

Today, we can lead our lives confident that Jesus is with us. As we read his Word, we see our Savior is alive. And then we can go out and tell others. Those first disciples were really changed—from slowly walking along, downcast, to running seven miles back to the city. We can have a spring in our step, as we use whatever means we have to proclaim the Easter truth.

For no matter how insurmountable our problems may seem, we have the answer: Christ is risen! When our steps are heavy and our spirits are sagging we have the perfect medicine: Christ is risen! Even when we have to stand at the grave of a loved one, we can have hope as we say, “Christ is risen!”

As we recall the Truth of Easter, our hearts will burn with hope once again. Amen.