

## **“Who Is to be Believed?” based on Luke 24:1-12**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Easter, April 20, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Today we celebrate the central miracle of the Christian tradition. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Many consider it the lynchpin of our faith – If it is proven, then Christian faith is vindicated. Yet, at the same time, others say that if it is disproven, then Christian faith is in vain. In this, both the skeptics and the apologists are united because both the skeptics and the apologists make it about how one who believes should be regarded by the wider world – whether a Christian should be considered delusional, or if we should be celebrated for believing. Both the skeptics and the apologists make the resurrection about identity.

You see, rarely is someone convinced by naked facts, by convincing proof, or winning arguments. Yet, we have a courtroom sense, a detective novel concept, that drives us to think that we can show the facts are on our side. We think that if they line up on our behalf, then we can convince others to join us. This goes beyond our religious arguments. We do the same with politics or deciding where to go for dinner. We think our rational minds are in control, but, in truth, we are only open to changing our minds, if that change is emotionally consistent with our existing world view.

In the Prisoner of Azkaban, the third novel and movie in the Harry Potter series, Harry’s friend, Hermione Granger, storms out of Professor Trelawney’s divination class. Granger was born into a family of muggles – ordinary, non-magical people. Despite her powers, she is consistently portrayed as being more interested in the science of her magic. Now in her third year, she is doubling up on her course load, trying to absorb every fact and every method she can.

But Trelawney’s course on divination is very inexact – it is entirely interpretive, and this befuddles her. Her entire mindset is centered on getting repeatable results. She is a scientific magician. She storms out because once again, Trelawney is about to see the “Grim,” which is an omen of death, and, of course, it will be directed at her friend Harry again. Even though she is in this unbelievable world and she is a wizard in training, divination is outside her worldview.

The reality is that what Trelawney said could easily be predicted. After all, Harry is the target of Voldemort, the evil wizard who stands in as a kind of Satan character in the novels and movies. In the first two books, Harry is nearly killed by Voldemort. In fact, in all of them, this is so. It’s not much to predict that the Grim omen is valid. It should have been obvious to Hermione. Yet she is propelled by her feeling that she needs to acquire the right knowledge and then she can learn to do anything, to take control of her world and be the master of her own destiny.

She thinks she is the rational one, but like all of us, her emotions are leading the way. Hermione is an excellent characterization of our human condition. To use the illustration of the social scientist Jonathan Haidt, our minds are like an elephant and a rider. The rider is our rational mind, and we think that the rider is in control. But the elephant, which is our emotions, will go wherever it wants to go. All of us, man and woman, adult and child, are emotionally driven creatures. We all are seeking a sense of purpose, of belonging, and of safety.

The truth is that there is no way to “prove” the resurrection of Jesus that we celebrate today. However, equally true is that there is no way to “prove” he did not rise from the dead. There are facts that could be used to support both conclusions. So then, without our emotions – without something we deem as non-negotiable deep within us – we will usually only see the facts raised by one side or the other not as something that has finally convinced us otherwise, but as still another thing to disprove, or dismantle, so that we can remain secure in our place, firmly in the group to which we belong, and renewed in our purpose.

Our emotions force us to always prioritize our own ideas of safety, belonging, and purpose. It follows then that if you do not believe miracles are possible, and you consider this core to rational thought, then your emotions will lead you to dismiss anything miraculous as irrational. Likewise, if you hold to a belief that miracles are real and cannot be explained away, then you will be emotionally inclined to dismiss explanations of miracles. Neither stance is open minded, and I know that inside some of you, right now, as you hear this, you are rustling arguments, as to why I'm wrong – so, take note of this, because the elephant is leading you away.

I get it – I have a worldview that sees the miraculous as possible, yet I'm a skeptic. I love questioning things, so, I don't believe every miracle – like the rainbow body resurrections of Buddhism. Yet, I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I can close my mind to one, and openly and wholeheartedly embrace the other. But if I am honest, the more rational position for me would be to acknowledge the possibility then, that if one is possible, the other may be also. Rationality also does not require I reject both. Emotions say I can reject one alone, or that I must reject both, if I'm going to stay safe, belonging to the camp of a believer or a skeptic with a purpose.

Beloved, the truth is that the resurrection is not about “us” being vindicated by “our” belief. The resurrection is about Christ being vindicated, to be cleared of shame and suspicion put on him by the cross because of his horrific, shameful, and brutal crucifixion at the hands of Roman power. Our faith is NOT rooted in our ability to believe the facts and prove them. Our faith is rooted in the amazing love of God and God's presence with us.

Paul says the proof of this love is precisely that while we were sinners Christ died for us. The proof doesn't make sense as the world wants to make sense of it. This is not a mathematical proof – I say this over and over again. Nothing of faith is a simple math problem. Rather, it is the realization that if there is a God, and I believe there is, and if this God truly loves us, then it cannot be because of what we've done. No, it must be because God chooses us through Christ.

We are here to rejoice that God's love comes to us, pursues us, without us having to earn it. God's love is for the world, as John's gospel tells us, “since God so loved the world, God sent the unique (or only begotten Son), the eternal Son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” This is the heart of the Christian faith – that eternal Son came down to share in our humanity, and by his life within our every human limit, he pushed back against sin and death. He revealed for us God's mercy and God's healing power through him.

The powers of this world were pushed, and they pushed back, and he was betrayed by his people, crucified as a rebel against the Roman Empire, and he died. Indeed, he died for us, taking on the full power of sin and death, and he defeated these powers, as the Orthodox say in their liturgy, which we included in our Call to Worship, “Trampling down death by death.” He rose for us, freeing us with him, from death itself and our fear of it.

He ascended for us, sending the Holy Spirit to live in and among us as believers, so that by the Spirit we become more like Christ, transformed to turn from sin. Sin is real and God loves you too much to let you stay the way you are. We empowered by the love of God poured in our hearts by this same Spirit, which raised Jesus's body from the grave. The Spirit is the downpayment of our inheritance into a life that truly belongs only to the Son. It is given to us because the eternal Son, shared in our humanity, binding us to God now, and forever in the age to come.

Sisters and brothers, the provable facts might be as limited as that Jesus indeed existed, which no credible historian would deny. That he preached in Galilee and Jerusalem, and that the Roman government killed him. After this, his followers proclaimed that he had risen from the dead. They

proclaimed that the tomb was empty. They proclaimed his bodily resurrection as a sign of a resurrection of all bodies in the future. Yes, there is no way to prove that what they proclaimed was true, but certainly, we know they proclaimed this to be true, with many dying as martyrs to proclaim it.

Luke says Mary Magdalene and the women went to the tomb expecting a dead Jesus there. They brought spices which they had prepared to anoint his body and properly bury him. But when they arrived, the stone was moved away, and the tomb was empty. They entered and did not find Jesus's body, but two men stood by, shining – presumably angels, and they said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. Rather, he is risen." Then they quoted Jesus's words, "it is necessary that the Son of Man be delivered into the hands of sinful people and to be crucified, and on the third day to rise." Then they remembered he said it.

They returned from the tomb with the good news, being the first to proclaim the resurrection, and the other disciples did not believe them, discounting their testimony as women. I'm sorry women that this is a common theme. They heard their words as nonsense – after all, the dead do not rise. Jesus is dead. Their statement of the facts could not change their emotional state.

But Peter is different. Peter rose up, and rather than fully dismissing the women, ran to the tomb. Peter has an emotional reason to see for himself if this is true, since he had denied Jesus just a few nights before, fulfilling the prediction Jesus had made. Peter too found the tomb empty, finding no body, but just linen. That is Peter and his resurrection faith.

Beloved, as one of my former professors, Dale Allison, wrote in his book on the Resurrection, which has informed a lot of my sermon today. "[Paul was an opponent of Jesus] did not believe for himself until something overwhelming flipped him. God is no more in the argument than in the earthquake. God is in the experience."

As we celebrate this day, contemplate where you have seen God's love, whether personally as a feeling within you, or externally, when you can't figure out why someone seems to love you despite all of your shortcomings. Or maybe you have seen someone love someone else in such a way that it blows your mind because they cannot be repaid for their love. Where have you seen God's love at work in the world? Where have you experienced it?

If we focus on vindicating ourselves in our identity so that we look good for having the right belief or opinion, then we are looking right past the presence of God and missing the experience.

As we go out this Easter Sunday, I pray we are open to the experience of the resurrection, the experience of God in the gospel at work in our world and the good news of the Kingdom of God, with a humble Jesus who lived and died for us, rose for us, and ascended for us, all out of love for us as our brother and anointed King, as our Lord and our God.

May we be like him, motivated to love with humility and grace, serving one another without regard to worldly status, or how we will be repaid, and with forgiveness and acts of healing and reconciliation. For if we have been baptized into his death, so too, our faith says we have been raised with him and will be raised with him into this very kind of new, abundant, and eternal life.

Indeed, Christ is risen. The faith of our church was, is, and always will be that God entered our humanity, lived as we live, died for us, and rose again with his body walking among the living. We believe he lives eternally, and he will come again. As we go out, know it is far better for us to live this faith, than prove it. It is better to be scorned for this faith, than to triumph over others by proving it. Go then in the love of God to love and serve one another as Christ loves you. Amen.