

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday After Easter, April 7, 2024

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 188, 195:1, 190, 192:1-4, 196:1-3.

Lessons: Jeremiah 15:15-21, 1 Corinthians 15:12-26, Matthew 27:57-66.

Sermon Text: Matthew 28:11-15

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

It didn't take long after the resurrection of Jesus for the denials to begin. It started with his own people, the religious leaders of the Jews. Some Jews, known as the Sadducees, did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. But not all the leaders of the Jews were Sadducees.

Satan is sneaky. If he can get people in the visible church to deny plain, clear teachings of the Word of God in the Bible, then his work will be easier. If people who claim to be Christians deny what God says, then Satan's got it made! Humanly speaking, Christians have often said that Satan works harder to deceive believers in Christ, because he already has the unbelievers under his control and power. Today the Word of God tells us that

THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST WAS PROMPTLY DENIED

1. **The leaders of the Jews wanted to make sure the tomb containing Jesus' body was secure.**
2. **But the guards "*became like dead men*" at the resurrection.**
3. **The lies began!**

Jesus' enemies wanted to make sure that there was nothing that would allow people to think that Jesus had risen from the dead. They may have suspected that Jesus really could rise from the dead. After all, he had unmistakably brought Lazarus back to life after being dead for four days.

You heard in our gospel lesson that *"the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 'Sir,' they said, 'we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, "After three days I will rise again." So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.' 'Take a guard,' Pilate answered. 'Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.' So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard."* (Matthew 27:62-66)

Now, on the third day, the soldiers who were supposed to guard the tomb knew what had happened. When *"There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it"* Matthew tells us *"The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men."* (Matt. 28:2, 4) Then the grave was empty.

The damage had been done, and they must make the best of it, for there was no denying the facts. A few of them were delegated to make the report of the morning's happenings to the chief priests, who were responsible for their presence at the grave. The matter was serious enough to demand a meeting of the Sanhedrin in order to consider ways to prevent more damage to themselves and their cause. It was finally resolved to bribe the soldiers. *"When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money."*

When *"some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened,"* we assume they told the whole truth. The tomb is empty. There had been an earthquake. An angel

came down, rolled the stone away from the tomb, and said that Jesus had risen. All the guards could say for sure is that the disciples did not steal his body while they were on duty.

Matthew does not record that the leaders of the Jews even tried to dispute the facts with the guards. They apparently accept their report as true, even if they didn't want to believe it. These are, after all, Roman soldiers, and they had nothing to gain by lying. And something happened while they were on guard that they were supposed to prevent. The tomb was now empty and there was no evidence that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body.

The chief priests and the elders of the people had previously conspired together to accuse Jesus before Pilate to get him crucified and now they try to cover up the truth after his resurrection. And in doing so, they harden their hearts against God.

After all, what do you do if you have no explanation for something that has happened? What do you say if something happens that you just can't explain and for which there is no logical or scientific explanation? You may make up a hypothesis, or a theory about how something happened. Or you lie. Or you make up stories. Or you don't talk about it. You say nothing. The religious leaders of Jesus' own people lied.

Would you expect the Roman soldiers to tell such a self-incriminating tale that the body was stolen while they were supposed to be on duty guarding the tomb? Yet when they receive the bribe, a large amount of money, that is exactly the story that should be told if it should reach the ears of the governor, Pontius Pilate.

They took the money, but the story was against common sense. The lie which the leaders of the Jews taught the soldiers to repeat was surely the essence of stupidity. They were to spread the report that the disciples of Christ came by night, while they were sleeping, and stole the body. The soldiers are supposed to have been asleep, and yet to have seen the thieves, and known that they were disciples! More important to the soldiers was the promise which the members of the Council were forced to give, namely, that they would guarantee to cover up the matter in case the governor should ever find out about it. The leaders of the Jews would vouch for the safety of the Roman soldiers. For a Roman soldier to be found asleep at his post was certainly a dangerous matter for him. So the ridiculous report went out among the Jews and became a common rumor among them.

And, of course, Caiaphas and his followers could claim that the disciples of Jesus carried off his body by night. They then spread the news of the empty sepulcher.

The Jews, the people chosen by God, had condemned his only-begotten Son to death, hoping to have done with him, but death could not hold him. And the history and the facts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ have become a cornerstone of faith among countless people who have come to believe in that Jesus Christ who forgives their sins and assures them of their own resurrection and eternal life just by believing in him as their Savior.

Matthew concludes this history by writing *“And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day,”* to the day he wrote these inspired words.

And that lie has continued. And more lies have been fabricated.

Just as Scripture points out the false teachers with their errors who attacked Jesus and his followers, so we are bound to proclaim the truth of God's word and to point out false teachers and their errors.

This denial of the resurrection of Jesus Christ has persisted and grown, even among those who would like to call themselves Christians.

I hope that you learned and remember, perhaps even going back to your catechism instruction, that any church which teaches or even tolerates in its midst any doctrine other than that which the Bible teaches is a heterodox church, a false-teaching church.

In the same way that we learn in secular matters not only to do what is the correct thing or way of doing things but also to avoid the wrong ways of doing things, we must learn both about what God teaches and what God condemns. There are those who think that we should never speak anything bad about the teachings and practices of other churches. But God is unflinching. His commandments teach both 'this is what you must do' and 'Thou Shalt Not', 'You Shall Not'. Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians *“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”* (Galatians 1:8-9)

Even today there are those who deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ or try to explain it away. The lies about the resurrection of Jesus continue. Twentieth century “theologians” write of the resurrection of Jesus

as a “biblical tradition” – not as a fact. Now some of these phrases may seem confusing, and that is just the point. They do not speak clearly and say “Jesus really, truly, literally rose from the dead.” They speak instead of “an anonymous Jesus”. They write that “Philosophy and science have convinced most theologians that only in a superficial sense is actual history illuminated by the rising of Christ”. They speak of “philosophical idealism in presenting the meaning of Christ’s resurrection.” The resurrection is treated as “a piece of imagery that was projected by the myth-making faculty of the primitive mind in an effort to express the internally apprehended meaning of the crucifixion”. It is a “God-determined event that is visible only to the God-created eye of faith.” Does that make sense? Not to me! Those quotations are from a book titled A Handbook Of Christian Theology, published in 1958!

But there is more false doctrine even today. In the book “What’s Going On Among The Lutherans, published in 1992, we learn about what the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) teaches and tolerates. Remember, any church which teaches or even tolerates in its midst any false doctrine is a heterodox church. The ELCA’s primary theological textbook used in its seminaries in the 1990s teaches that “Mythological symbolism contributed to the interpretation of the event of the resurrection. The question has become acute in modern theology whether in the resurrection we are dealing with only a myth or with a truly historical event.” Again: “...the resurrection of the Body. This does not mean a biological revivification, such as is found in the case of the young man in the village of Nain.” And there is more: “Contrary to other ‘resurrection’ stories in the Bible, Jesus is not perceived as having returned to this life. His resurrection was not a resuscitation indicating that in certain exceptional instances people can be returned to their former state of life.” One pastor explained that liberal pastors used words that had changed in meaning, explaining “Thus I might speak of the ‘empty tomb’ on Easter but I would not have meant that I believed that Jesus actually, physically rose from the dead.”

If you think these are new facts, I know from personal experience that pastors in the ELCA who are my age were taught by seminary professors who in the 1960’s denied the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps the most terrible, saddest thing about any denial of Jesus’ resurrection is the damning eternal results. Those who deny that truth will themselves experience a bodily resurrection, but the result will be a resurrection unto eternal damnation in hell. Those who do not believe in all that Jesus accomplished will cut themselves off from true life. They are spiritually dead. They will receive an inevitable and appalling resurrection on the last day and will be damned.

The question has been asked as we read in the Bible, as you heard in our Epistle lesson: ***“But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”*** (1 Corinthians 15:12-17)

But for all who believe, the joyful answer is ***“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”*** (1 Corinthians 15:20)

“When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15:54-57) Celebrate that victory even today with fellow Christians, and tomorrow, and forever! Amen.

(Adapted from a Ministry By Mail sermon for May 4, 2014)