

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday after Easter, April 25, 2010

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Hymns: 245, 358:1-4, 196, 198, 411:4.
Lessons: Psalm 49, Acts 4: 1-4, Mark 9: 9-30.
Text: Mark 16: 9-16.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Do you remember what I told you last Sunday? OK, with a question like that, you might panic and think “what am I supposed to remember? Pastor said lots of things in his sermon last Sunday, and let’s see, what else did he say, in Bible class, or somewhere else that I am supposed to remember?” Well, I’m not going to quiz you on a specific fact I told you. But I ask the question to show you how frail our memories are. Most humans are like that. We don’t have photographic memories and often remember only the vaguest details of what we hear. Aren’t we often like the young child, who when asked on the way home from church what the sermon was about answers “God and Jesus”?

But not remembering can have a very serious result. If we are in a burning building and don’t remember how to get to the exits, we could be in trouble. If we don’t remember what Jesus tells us in his Word, we could be in much worse trouble. Today let’s talk about

THE UNBELIEF OF JESUS’ CLOSEST DISCIPLES

1. **They did not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive.**
2. **Jesus “rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.”**

Right at the very beginning of his ministry Jesus made very clear the importance of believing, of faith, of trusting in God and placing all your confidence in him. We read in Mark chapter one: ***“Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.”“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”*** Mark 1:14-15. Turn away from your sins and repent of them, change your lives and believe the Gospel! A little later in Jesus’ ministry John records this about Jesus’ first miracle, changing water into wine at the wedding: ***“This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.”*** John 2:11 Jesus’ disciples spent about 3 years with him on earth, daily listening to him, talking to him, and watching him work. Three full years! That’s about the same amount of time as someone going to a four-year college. They had seen and heard enough of Jesus’ preaching to know that it was by believing in God, and believing in him, Jesus, as Savior that one was saved.

Now they – his disciples – are the people who don’t believe. The evangelists make it abundantly clear that they “didn’t believe” Jesus had risen from the dead. They didn’t believe he was alive. Our sermon text refers to at least 4 specific instances of his closest followers not believing Jesus had risen from the dead. They had heard others talking about it, some had even seen him, and at first no one seemed to believe it. Mary Magdalene at first didn’t believe. We heard last week how she was crying because she thought someone had stolen Jesus’ body, and after she saw him, she told the others, but our text today makes it clear that ***“She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.”***

“Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.” Among those who did not believe the witness of the women were two men who later in the day set out for Emmaus. They didn’t understand everything that had happened since Thursday in Jerusalem. And, of course, Jesus himself was the one to explain it to them on a walk which likely lasted several hours. Luke reports that Jesus himself ***“said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?””*** Luke 24:25-26. Mark just barely mentions those two in our text. Luke tells us that when Jesus revealed himself to them, ***“They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.””*** Luke 24:32-34. The evidence is growing that Jesus is alive!

And in the next verses of our text we read ***“Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.”*** He admonished them. Not just for their lack of faith but also for ***“their stubborn refusal to believe”!*** They deserved this rebuke. After all, those whom they refused to believe were witnesses sent by the Lord himself. How could the disciples expect others to believe when they in turn would be sent out to proclaim the risen Lord, if they persisted in unbelief? Besides, Jesus had even prophesied his resurrection while he was still with them. And even before that, the Old Testament foretells Jesus’ resurrection.

Why do people not believe? What does it take to convince some people? There can be many reasons, but here are some possibilities: Maybe it is a short memory span. Maybe we forget some key concepts. Maybe we don’t believe because it conflicts with our personal opinions. Maybe we just don’t want to accept facts.

Let me list a few things which people once believed because they didn’t believe the truth and the facts. We think of ridiculous ideas that we now reject such as these: ‘The world is flat.’ ‘The earth is the center of the solar system and the center of the universe.’ Well, it is true that God tells us that mankind whom he created is the most important creature of his creation! Here are a few more things that people didn’t believe: ‘Men didn’t really walk on the moon. It was just fuzzy pictures from a television studio somewhere.’ ‘The assassination of John F. Kennedy was a huge conspiracy involving other nations and even U.S. government agencies.’ And there are any number of ‘conspiracy theories’ floating around because people don’t believe the facts. Then of course we mention the debate of evolution versus creation. We don’t believe in any man-made theories of evolution because God in his Word tells us how all things and mankind came about. But many people don’t believe in the fact of creation because they are blinded to God’s Word by bits and pieces of what God created and by man’s explanations of how men think those things came to be. Evolutionists don’t always examine the entire picture or may not consider any alternatives except evolution because they don’t believe in the Creator God.

So how do people let us know that they don’t believe something? Maybe you have heard people blurt out “I don’t believe you!” when they doubt something someone has said. But Jesus’ followers plainly didn’t believe at first that he had risen from the dead.

In our Gospel lesson today are two very significant passages. After Jesus, Peter, James, and John came down from the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured, we read that they were ***“discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.”*** Mark 9:10. At that point in Jesus’ ministry, they weren’t sure what it was all about. Of course, many times we read things such as this in the scriptures: ***“For [Jesus] taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day.”*** Mark 9:31. The women were told at the empty tomb ***“He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.”*** Luke 24:6-7. At the

time of the transfiguration the disciples didn't understand. Now, they still didn't understand, and worse, didn't believe.

The other key point in our Gospel lesson has to do with the father of the boy who was possessed by an evil spirit. The boy's father had spoken to Jesus saying "[the evil spirit] *has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.*" "*If you can?'*" said Jesus. "*Everything is possible for him who believes.*" *Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'*" Mark 9:22-24. That is something the disciples should have been praying, individually, and as a common public prayer: Lord, take away our unbelief!

The disciples did not believe the words of the women to whom Jesus had also appeared. They had to be convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt. Well, Jesus did finally on the night of that first day of the week appear to them. But John tells us about Thomas: "*Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'*" *But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.'*" *A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'*" *Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'*" *Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'*" *Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'*" John 20:24-29. We are thankful for the power of the Word of God, for we were not present to hear the testimony of the women, nor have we seen the risen Savior. The subsequent testimony of the disciples as recorded in the Bible, the very words of God, assures us that Christ did indeed rise from the dead. They were convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt by seeing Jesus himself. Easter does not only mean an empty grave, but also a risen Savior and Lord. He paid for our sins by dying. He proved that fact by rising from the dead.

Unbelief is an on-going problem. We know and meet people who don't believe in Jesus as their Savior. If we don't remember what Jesus tells us in his Word, we could be in much worse trouble than merely not remembering where the exits are in a burning building. If someone doesn't believe, he will end up in the eternally burning fires of hell. Mark compresses much of what Jesus said between his resurrection and his ascension into heaven in these words: "*Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.'*" It is by believing that one is saved. It is through not believing that one is damned. We are also reminded of Jesus' words in John 3: "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*" John 3:17-18.

The results of unbelief are damning. The danger of unbelief is eternal damnation in hell. One word sums it up: condemned. An eternity in hell is the result of refusing to believe in Jesus as your Savior. So we must continue to contradict unbelief and preach the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We must learn and use the Word of God to refute and fight unbelief. Faith comes from hearing the Word of God, and faith is strengthened, it receives its sustenance through the Word of God: "*Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*" Romans 10:17 (NIV) Or maybe you memorized: "*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*" Romans 10:17 (KJV)

And so today we pray "Lord, I believe what Thou hast said, Help me when doubts assail me; Remember that I am but dust And let my faith not fail me." (The Lutheran Hymnal 306:6) May we never be found among those who don't believe what God has told us! Amen!