

“They Told All This”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday – March 27, 2016

Luke 24: 1-12

On Tuesday night, the First Presbyterian Church of Englewood, New Jersey, experienced a tragedy. The sanctuary, which dated back to 1870 and consisted of Tiffany stained-glass windows, suffered a fire. The Gothic structure, filled with a newly-renovated organ, intricately carved wood, and a space that hosted so many memories, was destroyed. The cause was likely faulty electrical wiring, according to the church’s pastor.

I have lived through a church fire – my church growing up was struck by lightning. I know first-hand how devastating and shocking it can be. But I cannot imagine going through that experience this week – Holy Week – and what that would mean for that congregation in New Jersey of over 450 parishioners.

The community of Englewood has reached out to First Presbyterian Church in extraordinary ways: a local Episcopal Church provided space for the church to have Good Friday services, and they are holding their Easter Worship today at the town’s performing arts center. Churches, synagogues, and mosques have all offered their assistance.

I was struck, though, by what the church and its pastor, Rev. Richard Hong, said through the church’s website. “We are grateful for the outpouring of offers for support. At this time, we are taking things one step at a time. The church is people, not buildings. We worship Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead, and his church will not be deterred.” The timing of the blaze, according to Hong, will bring special meaning this Easter. “It means there’s no possible way the theme of resurrection could mean more to us than it will this Sunday” (<http://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/3/23/Historic-New-Jersey-Presbyterian-Church-heavily-da/>).

What does this day mean to us? Is it all about new dresses, clothes, and shoes? Is it all about lilies, daffodils, tulips, and other spring flowers that are coming into bloom? Is it our reminder that school is out for Spring Break, so we can get out of town and relax a little?

What does this day mean to us – as Christians? Does it remind us of where we have been earlier this week – in the streets of Jerusalem, at a table in an upper room, in a garden called Gethsemane, in the courtyard of Pilate, at the foot of the cross, or watching the stone rolled in front of the tomb? Do those events of this week bring forth a deeper meaning for this day and our faith? Do we believe – truly believe – what

the women came and told the disciples: that the tomb was empty, that the angels were there, that our Lord is risen indeed?

The two greatest tenets of the Christian faith are grounded in its two, high holy days. We believe in a God who came to us in human form – God with us – on Christmas. And we believe in a God who would not allow death to have the final word – on Easter morning. Our faith, as Christians, is rooted in the belief that God’s love for the world, in the incarnate form of Jesus Christ, is greater than even death, and we celebrate that fact today.

Yet it’s not an easy “fact” to get our heads around, is it? After all, we are human beings. We tend to judge things through our senses, especially what we can see and hear and touch. When we see a building destroyed by fire, it is hard to see anything but destruction. When we hear mean-spirited words spoken, it is hard to believe there might be reconciliation in the future. When we feel the pain of death, it is hard to believe there is something more than emptiness and loss.

It can be hard to profess faith in something we cannot see or feel. And yet, Easter is about professing our faith in God’s improbable act of turning death on its head, and telling this world: “He is alive!”

As I did my preparation for this Sunday, I found very helpful the thoughts of Shawnthea Monroe, who is a United Church of Christ pastor in Ohio. She writes:

In January, we were introduced to Planet Nine. This new addition to our solar system is thought to be ten times the mass of Earth and 50 billion miles away. Scientists from the California Institute of Technology explained that, while they have not actually found the planet, they are sure it exists – because nothing else accounts for the way objects in the outer part of the solar system move. “It must be there,” said one astronomer. “Nothing else could exert such influence.”

I only recently came to grips with the fact that Pluto is no longer a planet, and now I’m told there is another heavenly body I must fit into my cosmology. It isn’t easy to give up what I learned as a child. But sometimes the accepted facts must change in light of new evidence.

This is essentially the message of Easter. The women who walk to the tomb in the predawn light think they know the facts. Luke’s Gospel tells us that they have seen it all: the crucifixion, the death, and the burial (23:55). They know who they are looking for and where to find him. Carrying spices and ointments, they come to do what they have done many times before – clean a dead body and prepare it for burial . . .

Then things fall off the map. The stone has been rolled away, and the tomb is empty . . .

The women are reminded that this is precisely what Jesus said would happen, “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (Luke 24:7). According

to Luke, the women remembered his words and believe. If only it were so simple for us . . . (Shawnthea Monroe, *Christian Century*, March 16, 2016: 22).

When we encounter death in our lives, we are surrounded by questions. How did she die? What was wrong with him? Was it sudden or expected? How is the family doing? It's only natural for us as human beings to react this way. It points to our need for information, for explanation, for understanding in the midst of something so jarring and incomprehensible.

Death can be incomprehensible. It alters our world as women and men, children and adults, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, friends and neighbors. We wake up and realize that our world no longer includes that important person in our life. And so we are left with a decision: to take the world as it is, or to believe that there is more to this world than just what we can see and feel around us. It's not so simple for us, even as Christians today.

Monroe continues: *First-century Christians had their own doubts about the resurrection. We know this from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In true Pauline form, Paul constructs a robust theological argument for the resurrection of Jesus, insisting that if Christ is not raised, then all is lost. In a time when people were suffering and dying for their faith, a Christ who was not resurrected offered no hope.*

For Paul, the resurrection is not just one part of the story. It is the reality in which the whole gospel narrative unfolds. Too much is at stake for the resurrection not to be true.

Theologian John S. Whale once said that "the Gospels don't explain the resurrection; the resurrection explains the Gospels." I agree. I believe Jesus rose on the third day – even though I cannot prove it. We have no firsthand account of the event; no one witnessed the first gasp of breath or the shudder of the limbs as the heart beat once more. No one was with Jesus when he shrugged off the linen cloth and stepped out of the tomb. No one saw it happen.

Just as no one has seen Planet Nine. But what else could exert such influence?

Only the resurrection could turn cowardly Peter into a preacher of renown, could transform Saul into the great missionary Paul. Only the resurrection could turn ordinary women and men into saints and martyrs, preachers and prophets, activists and organizers. Generation after generation, we make our way to the empty tomb and hear the words that rock our world: He is not here. He is risen (ibid).

The resurrection also turned the women that day into the first witnesses of God's almighty act. The four most important words in this account from Luke are: "They told all this" (24:8). The women did not cower in fear after their encounter with the angels in the empty tomb. They went to the disciples and told all that they had witnessed, even though some doubted them (24:11). Indeed, had it not been for the

women's faithful witness, Peter himself may not have gone to the tomb, and in seeing it with his own eyes, been "amazed at what had happened" (24:12).

Easter should shake us to our core. Easter should cause us amazement at all that has happened. Easter should exert its influence on us to witness to this improbable act of love, so that we all might go and tell all this to a world that so desperately needs to hear words of hope, peace, and joy.

The resurrection exerts its influence on a pastor and his parishioners, whose church has just been destroyed by fire, to say, "The church is people, not buildings; we worship Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead; his church will not be deterred; the theme of resurrection will mean more to us today, even in the face of tragedy, than it ever has before."

The resurrection exerts its influence on a family, who has experienced death, to face their loss with hope and peace, even in the midst of their grief. The resurrection exerts its influence by promising that death is not the final answer, that there is more to this world than what is around us, and that God has prepared many rooms in his eternal house, where we will be reunited with all the saints.

The resurrection exerts its influence on us as Christians to speak and act and love in ways we normally would not. It influences us to pray without ceasing; to forgive those who have hurt us; to welcome the stranger; to befriend the lonely; to speak courageously when no one else will.

We may not have seen Jesus raised from the dead. We may not have been there to hear the women's first testimony of the empty tomb. We may not have felt Jesus' side when he appeared to Thomas, or talked to him along the road to Emmaus. We may not have been first-hand witnesses to these things.

But we believe. We believe, as did the women, that God has done something remarkable on this day. We believe, as did Peter, that God's amazing love is at hand and is at work in this world. We believe, as have generations of saints who have gone before us, that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Affirmation of Faith, Book of Common Worship, PCUSA, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 1993: 96; used on March 27, 2016).

We believe that the tomb is empty, that death has been conquered, that God's hope will never die.

Now go and tell the world, as the women did, all that you believe. He is not here. He is risen.

Alleluia! Amen.