

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

Scripture: Acts 10:34-43

"Why I Believe" (part 1)

JESUS CHRIST IS RISEN TODAY! ALLELUIA!

We began the service singing those wonderful words. These words were first penned in Latin as a hymn in the 14th century by an unknown believer. They were later expanded upon by the Anglican Priest Charles Wesley in 1740; and sung to a tune from that same time period. And today it is the most popular Easter hymn and will no doubt be sung for many more years to come. But they are not just mere words, they reflect the abiding truth that Jesus Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth is indeed risen from dead! That's what we celebrate today - the most significant day in the history of the world. The day that death's defeat was made final. Yes the birth of Christ was astounding and so was His death but it is the resurrection that validates both His birth and His death. And after 2000 plus years of critical examination and analysis we still have an empty tomb.

I am reminded of the story of three Anglican priests who were asked what they wanted said at their funeral. The first said he wanted them to say he put God first, others second and self last. The second said I want them to say he served God, he served his family and he served his church well. And the third? Well he said I just want them to say, "Hey look he's still moving!"

We're here today because Jesus didn't stay dead he moved. He moved out of that tomb and came back into our world. And He moved into our hearts and into our lives and He is moving in this very place right now. So that is the huge difference between the Christian faith and every other religion in the world. Christianity stands alone. The other religions had great leaders and they died and stayed dead, never to move again. You can go to their graves. You can see where their decayed bones lie and a monument. But you go to the grave of Christ and it is an empty tomb and there is no monument. No, it's a movement., because Christ is alive and He has moved out of the tomb and into our world never to be stopped again.

And if by chance you come to a service and if it is my funeral service and I'm in the casket and you look at me, I want you to know that I'm not there. I've already moved out and moved on. To a better place that when I take my last breath of this air my very next breath is celestial air. The moment we leave this life we are in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, forever. I firmly believe that.

But why do I believe that? Why do I believe that Jesus Christ is in fact, risen from the dead? There are many reasons why one can make the case for the veracity of Christ's resurrection. There is much historical evidence. But the reason I believe that Christ is risen from the dead goes beyond just an empty grave, it goes to the reason for belief in Christ in and of itself. In other words, if someone were to ask you why do you believe, what would you say? How would you respond? Do you believe because your parents told you? Do you believe because it makes you feel better? Do you believe because you want to be part of something bigger than yourself? Why do you believe?

I want to share this morning why I believe. You see the resurrection is not to an end in and of itself. It simply points to a reality far greater than itself. And this reality is ultimate reality, what we call God. And when I look around at this world of ours, at life itself and history, there are seven realities that bear witness to the ultimate reality of God. These seven are why I believe. In fact, we find these seven throughout the Holy Scriptures - the Bible.

1) THE CREATION

We even find them in our first reading from Acts. Please turn now to **Acts 10:34-43**. The Apostle Peter is speaking to Gentiles and he says, ***"I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality,"*** Let's stop there for a moment - God. Some like to say "Higher Power" but the God of the Bible is not just a higher power, He is a personal God who made everything that we can see and that we can't see.

So the first reason why I believe is creation itself. The universe – the uncountable galaxies, solar systems, stars, the planets, and specifically planet earth with the plant and animal worlds, the continents and oceans, the varied topography; the diversity of mankind, the anatomy of the human body and the complexities of the human brain. Today modern folks like to say that the ancients were superstitious because they didn't understand the law of physics and modern chemistry and biology. But the truth is that we have actually found that the world in which we live is even more complex and intricate than we can even fathom. For example, take one human cell. It is made up of proteins that are literally a code of information and if that code is not in the right order, you don't have the right proteins and you don't have a cell. And then how are the cells programmed to work in synergy with one another and then work with the various organs all in unison as one body? Have you ever seen the DNA molecule? Every creature has a unique DNA. Or how about the human brain? Why does the human brain have areas for art, music and the capacity to love others outside of itself? What evolutionary purpose is there for such things? That has nothing to do with survival of the fittest.

Science teaches us that we live in a cause and effect universe. For every cause there is an effect, for every effect there is a cause. In other words, things don't happen by accident. There must be an action before you can have a reaction. And everything that we use in this world has been made by someone and before that thing you use or wear could be made it must have started in the mind. And we know that thoughts are invisible. It is why the Bible says that the things of this world were made by things that are invisible and that the reality of a Creator is known through that which has been made **Romans 1:21 - *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse!*** And why are we put on a planet that is so beautiful and provides everything we need to live? Is it all just one big cosmic fluke or accident? I don't think so. So the first reason why I believe is simply by looking at Creation itself, its complexity, the interdependence of all its parts, its beauty and its laws of science and mathematics. ***"In the beginning God created the heavens and earth."*** There is no other rational alternative.

2) TRUTH

“but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.” “Does what is right.” This statement highlights the next reason, and that is the reality of absolute truth. There is a right way and wrong way. There is truth and there is falsehood. In other words, there are some things in the universe that are always true no matter what. Think about the laws of science. The laws of physics, chemistry and biology are always true in their normal contexts. Think of mathematics. Even think of human disciplines of language and law. There are things in life that just are. Even when it comes to history and to looking at events in a court of law, there is a desire to get to the truth, *“Just the facts, ma'am”* as Detective Joe Friday used to say on *Dragnet*. And so when it comes to spiritual and moral realities why would it be any different? And when we speak of the One true God – we are speaking of that which is ultimate good. And why do we know it is ultimate good? Because it is that which brings forth life. Evil brings forth death. Falsehood brings forth death. But goodness brings forth life and so does the truth of God.

3) THE WORD OF GOD – THE BIBLE

What is the third reason why I believe? ***36“The word which He sent to the sons of Israel,”*** The third reason is the Word of God, the Bible. Why this book? Why not the Koran? Why not the Book of Mormon? Why not some other ancient religious book? Well first off, this book is unlike any other in that it actually is a of 66 different books and writings, written over a period of 1500 years, by 40 different authors from various walks of life and in different times. And yet there is a unity and consistency to it as a whole. And this unity and consistency is not forced. In other words, there was no conspiracy to make it all sound the same. There are passages that don't go together perfectly. There are minor differences that have not been changed to make things fit. This adds to the integrity of the book. Moreover, we have thousands of ancient manuscripts in various languages from various time periods that show that the Bible has not changed for over 2000 years and in some cases 3000 years. It is the same word that our Lord knew and used (our Old Testament) and that the Apostles later wrote as our New Testament. The very fact that it is the most preserved and documented ancient book highlights its uniqueness as an ancient text. And even though it is 2000-3000 years old, it is still relevant today when it comes to speaking to the condition of man and the human heart. Its wisdom is timeless, practical and life changing and most importantly the whole witness of the Bible is to testify to the coming of Jesus Christ, both His first and His second. And this includes prophecies in the Bible which have come true even though they were written hundreds of years in advance!

4) THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

And that leads us to the fourth reason – Jesus Christ Himself. ***“preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)— 37you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38“You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.”***

Has there ever been a more unique and profound person who has ever lived? One who spoke with authority; One who claimed to be the perfect Son of God and perfect Son of Man. The One who said, ***"I am resurrection and life," "I am the bread of life," "I am the vine," "I am the door," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the light of the world," "I am the way the truth and the life,"*** and if that still is not enough, ***"Before Abraham was, I am!"***

The One who was not first a miracle worker, but was first about revealing the very nature and heart of God. The One who before He healed the paralytic, said, ***"son your sins are forgiven."*** The One who didn't just say if you want to be great in the kingdom of God you must be servant of all but who first said repent for the Kingdom is at hand. The One who because he was full of compassion and love not only healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, who touched and cleansed lepers, who cast out demons, but was willing to suffer and die for all of us; all to not only show us the depth of God's love but to show us the integrity of God's character. There is no one like Jesus EVER nor should there ever be!

5) LIFE TRANSFORMATION

39***"We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40******"God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41******not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42******"And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.***

The fifth reason why I believe is that of life transformation. Why is it that people from all walks of life have had complete changes in their lives? They have been touched by the grace of God. Think of people with powerful testimonies – from the extreme – like a witch doctor in Kenya, or the drug dealer in prison, to the businessman who was consumed with money, or the married couple who divorced but got back together? Or those who have come from other religions, the Jew or Moslem, the Mormon or Jehovah's Witness? Or myself and many like me here? We may not have had a radical conversion but we recognize that we can't be who we should be unless we first begin with the One who made us; and when we look to Jesus we not only see the One who made us but the One who loves us and wants to not only have a personally relationship with us but who wants to live in us forever! You say, but wait a minute. I can show you Christians who have become Moslem or Jewish or even atheist. I can show you people who were notoriously evil but are good citizens now. Oh yes, you can but their numbers are quite low. You say how so? How can you know? And do you know what I say? Well just look at the numbers. People aren't turning away from Christ in droves, they are turning to Christ in record numbers throughout the world.

6) THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

And this leads me to the sixth reason why I believe. The Body of Christ, the Church of God. ***43******"Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."***

Those whose lives are now transformed impact others and through the witness of Christ in us more and more people come to Christ. Why else would there be over 2 billion Christians on earth, more than any other religion? Why is it the Church of Jesus Christ that started with 12 apostles and a few hundred disciples has grown throughout the world into every nation with well over 2 billion followers. Now, certainly many of these folks may be Christians in name only, trusting in their particular Christian tradition or denomination. We aren't talking about such people. We are talking about those who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, who recognize that we are saved by grace and through faith in Him, who understand that God's Word is our final authority and guide concerning salvation and life, and that God exists eternally as the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In other words, people transformed from the inside out by the Spirit of Christ. Those born again – Jesus said unless you are born again you can't enter the Kingdom of God. You see that is why following Jesus is different from all other religions. Ours is the truth of one God who made all things, who loves us, who has revealed Himself to us through Jesus Christ and who calls us to repent from our selfish and sinful ways. It is a relationship based on grace not the law. Islam the other monotheistic religion and the only one who even comes close to penetrating the entire world is based on coercion. It is forced on people. That is how it has spread. That is how it has been maintained. It spread through the sword, through conquest and through not allowing anyone to challenge it. And it is that way until this very day. In every nation in which Islam is the majority religion, there are laws that prohibit religious freedom, or discriminate against those who are from other religions or who are Muslim but want to leave their faith.

You see, Islam is not an inside-out faith, it is an outside-in faith. They try to force folks to have a transformation through rules and laws. This is demonstrated in what happens when they gain control of a community – no freedom of thought or exchange of ideas. Well, let me just say that if you have a good idea you don't have force people to follow it. Do you remember what the communists did? They built a wall in East Berlin to keep people from leaving. It's the same with Islam – they keep people from leaving the faith or coming to faith in anything but Allah with a wall of forced submission. Now there were times in Church history in which Christians tried to force their beliefs on others, but this never worked. Why? We can only be changed from the inside out and that can only happen when we allow God to work in our hearts, the power to change can only come from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

7) ISRAEL

Now there is one more reason why I believe. I almost left this one out. And that is the nation of Israel. Again look back at **Acts 10:39**, "***We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem.***" God made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob was renamed Israel and he had twelve sons whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel. It was from Israel that the Messiah would come. But God also made a covenant with Israel through Moses and another with David. The people of Israel would be His people and Jerusalem would be God's city. The Messiah would first come to His people and to Jerusalem and even though Jesus was rejected by the majority of His people and their leadership when He came 2000 years ago, Jesus promised that He would return to Jerusalem and when He did, His people, the Jews would receive Him. And yet He also prophesied that Jerusalem would fall and the Temple destroyed and the Jewish people scattered throughout the earth. This indeed happened

in 70 AD. But now in the last 100 years, the Jews have come back to the land promised to their father Abraham. They now control Jerusalem, the original capital of Israel. God's covenant people are back and they are making preparations to rebuild the Temple of Solomon!

The simple fact that a people who were persecuted like no other people throughout history, who were scattered throughout the nations, come back to their original homeland is unprecedented; literally an ancient nation resurrected after 2600 years. 100 years ago the Ottoman Turks controlled the land we call Israel. No longer! All of the above indicates the reality of God in Christ at work in our world. Jesus is indeed on the move!

And the resurrection? Well, we see that it simply reflects all seven realities above. Israel is resurrected, the Church is birthed after the resurrection with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; life transformation is the result of the old man of sin dying and the new man of God's Spirit being raised to new life (visibly demonstrated in our baptisms); all that Jesus said and did was confirmed by His resurrection; the prophecies of the Word of God were fulfilled by the resurrection; the resurrection is the truth; and the same One who brought forth life and created all things can indeed raise the dead and bring forth new life.

And do you know what else? All seven reasons are also found in the Anglican liturgy during the prayer of consecration at Holy Communion. Please turn in your prayer books to p. 55. Look at what is said: "*We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us 1)in **creation**; 2) in the calling of **Israel** to be your people; 3)in **your Word** spoken through the prophets; and above all in 4) **the Word made flesh, Jesus, your son**...5)In Him, you have delivered **us** from evil and made **us** worth to stand before you (**life transformation**) 6) In him, you have brought **us** out of error into **truth**...*

And who is the "us"? The Church of Jesus Christ! Do you see how all seven realities are proclaimed in our service? All provide the framework for truly understanding why the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only so important but why it is for real. So why do you believe? I hope you can answer the question - but not simply up here (your head) but in here (your heart) and that it will mean not just new life when you die but a transformed life here today! So on this resurrection day, let's get a move on!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!