

Fully Alive in Christ

Cristo vive, Cristo vive.

Christ is alive, sisters and brothers and others,

Christ is alive and Christ is here.

Do you doubt it? Lo dudas?

You can doubt it, you can question it all you want.

But I'm here today to tell you

That Christ is alive and Christ is here.

Amen? Amen.

There is a song in our new hymnal, Voices Together,

Called "Ask the complicated questions."

I love that song because it is about how doubt and questioning

Can be a part of a healthy faith journey.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith,

It's a tool we use to find the truth.

Doubt is like a shovel that pushes through the dirt of history

And tries to find a buried treasure, buried truths.

Doubt sifts through the many strands of tradition and practice

To find the thread that links back to the beginning,

The thread that ties us sitting here today

To events that happened long ago.

Doubt is fine, but Easter is not a holiday of doubt.

Easter is not a time of questioning and searching.

That's what Lent and Holy Week are for,

Or what the rest of the year is for.

Easter is the day that we affirmatively state,

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

We are not here to say it's probable that Jesus rose from the dead.

We're not here to say that Jesus' teachings live on today

And so he metaphorically achieved life after death.

We are not here to say we happen to believe that Jesus rose,

We are here to state as fact that Jesus Christ is alive,

And Jesus Christ is here today.

Now you all know I like to dig deep into scripture.

I like to find hidden or forgotten meanings,

New ways of telling old stories, funny Greek words to say.

You're not used to me making declarations of fact

Or making absolute statements about what the Bible means.

So why am I here today dismissing doubts and questions,

Holding up the traditional narrative unchallenged?

The answer underlies our scripture for today, Acts 10:34-43,

Which is a speech the Apostle Peter gives to the household of Cornelius.

Cornelius was a Gentile, not just a Gentile but a Roman.

Not just a Roman but a soldier, a commander of Roman soldiers,

A centurion in the army that occupied and oppressed the Jewish people.

Why is Peter at the house of a Roman army leader?

If you remember the story, Peter didn't want to go there.

God had to send Peter a vision of animals on a sheet three times

Before Peter was willing to go to this Gentile's house.

That's a story for another sermon,

But I remind you of that story because it is the context

For Peter's speech in today's scripture.

Peter packages the story of Jesus, his life and ministry,

His death and resurrection, his power and glory,
Into an amazingly concise capsule of speech.
This way of telling the Jesus story was no accident.
Early believers memorized speeches like this
So they could share the story of Jesus with other people.
They needed to keep it short and sweet, like an elevator pitch,
To catch people's attention and give them the basic ideas.
This elevator pitch is what bible scholars call the kerygma,
The earliest kernel of the Gospel,
Before it got smothered in layers of text and tradition.
The key section of the kerygma for today, of course,
Is that Peter says, "We are witnesses."
Peter says, "We are witnesses to all he did both in Judea and Jerusalem.
They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;
But God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,
Not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses,
And who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."
Those who like to insert doubt,
Those who enjoy being skeptical for skepticism's sake,
Namely, bible scholars and academics,
These folks like to poke their nose in here and say,
"Wait a minute!"
"There's no proof that Jesus rose from the dead!"
"There's no record of it in the official history books!"
"The people who wrote the story are biased!"
All those statements are true.
These days when we investigate a mystery,

We assume there should be modern forms of proof.

Video footage, newspaper articles, written material,

Fingerprints, blood spatter, DNA evidence.

Well, Peter didn't have any of that kind of evidence.

All Peter had was a type of proof that was, in the ancient world,

As rock-solid as you could get—witnesses.

Before everything was videotaped and written down,

It was difficult to prove anything beyond reasonable doubt.

The way people determined truth was to hear the word of witnesses.

The testimony of 3 witnesses was enough to convict someone of a crime,

So the testimony of all Jesus' disciples was basically bulletproof.

There were at least the 11 remaining apostles,

Plus all the women disciples, plus everyone who was there at Pentecost.

Each of them could witness to seeing the resurrected Jesus,

Or at least to the power of the Holy Spirit.

If a scholar today finds two ancient historians who agree

That something happened a certain way,

That's considered very solid evidence.

The testimony of all these witnesses cannot be dismissed.

As far as anyone at Cornelius' house was concerned,

Peter showed up with a story and with the receipts.

The verse after our Scripture passage today says,

“While Peter was still speaking,

The Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.”

So on top of all these witnesses, now we have

A mixed group of Jews and Gentiles who have heard Peter's proof

And then have that truth confirmed in their own bodies,

Feeling the power of the Holy Spirit.

The experience of Peter and the Apostles was so powerful

That it transformed each of their lives forever.

Their testimony was so powerful that it brought the enemies of God,

The Gentile Roman oppressors into the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The testimony of those Gentiles and other believers was so powerful

That they created a movement that upended an empire

And went on to change the whole world.

We can't know exactly what the early Christians preached,

And there was surely a variety among their messages,

But this glimpse in Acts of the kerygma, the heart of the Gospel

Shows us the power and primacy of the main idea,

Jesus died and rose again. We saw him and bear witness.

But why should we modern humans accept this idea?

We like to think of ourselves as very scientific these days,

And that ancient people were stupid and superstitious.

They might have been willing to believe in resurrection,

But we modern people know that's not possible.

This is an argument I've heard over the years.

People say, "I want to believe in the resurrection,

But it just doesn't fit with my view of how the world works."

Well, guess what.

The resurrection didn't fit with how anyone thinks the world works.

That's the whole point!

Perhaps because we've heard the story so many times,

We forget that a person coming back after being dead 3 days

Is an absolutely insane story that blew everyone's minds!

Jesus' followers needed a bunch of witnesses
For a claim so bold and unexpected.
Ancient people might have been ignorant of scientific principles,
But they didn't just believe any idea that came along.
It wasn't any easier for ancient people to believe
In the resurrection than it is for us today.
In order to make this story spread, they needed the best proof
You could get in those days, multiple witnesses.
But we don't have all those witnesses, you might say.
The disciples are dead and we just have this book now.
If that's what you say, then I'll point you toward that book,
Hebrews 12:1 which says that in fact,
"We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses."
In every generation since Peter,
The power of the risen Christ has touched people's lives
And transformed societies.
We are here in church this Easter Sunday
Because of long line of witnesses telling the story of Jesus,
But also telling their own stories of transformation,
Stories of becoming fully alive in the risen Christ.
If you don't believe Peter, believe those who came after.
And if you don't believe them, believe the people sitting here in front.
And if you don't believe them, believe the people sitting in the back.
We are not short of witnesses to the power of the risen Christ.
You can question the specifics.
You can ask the complicated questions.
But you can't deny our testimony.

We testify that God anointed Jesus with power.

We testify that Jesus was put to death on a cross.

We testify that God raised Jesus back to life.

We testify that though we didn't eat and drink with Jesus,
Jesus is alive and here with us today.

We know this not because we have a brain scan or DNA evidence,
But because our hearts and minds have been transformed by Jesus.

And dead guys can't transform anything.

We are witnesses to transformation.

We are witnesses to the risen Christ.

Christ is alive. Cristo vive.

And Christ is here today. Amen.