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Easter Sunday

Today's sermon is taken from the Acts of the Apostles and also the Gospel of John.

Jesus, our life, you are alive. In the beauty of the earth and the rhythm of the seasons and the mystery of time and space, you are alive. Jesus, our life, you are alive. In the tenderness of touch and the heartbeat of intimacy, in the images of solitude, Jesus, our life, you are alive. In the creative possibility of the dullest conversation, the dreariest task, the most threatening event, Jesus our life, you are alive. To offer recreation to every unhealed hurt, to every deadened place, to every damaged heart, you set before us great choice: Jesus risen from the dead. Therefore, we choose life. Jesus is alive. Amen.

Deep in our hearts we know it's true. We talk about heaven but regardless of how wonderful we've heard it described, most of us are not eager to make the journey. We're like the man who was sentenced to death; he was asked if he had any last requests. He said that he loved to sing, and he wanted to sing his favorite song one more time. He was asked what his favorite song was, and he replied, "One billion bottles of beer on the wall, on the wall, one billion bottles of beer on the wall...."

We don't know how long it would take to sing all the choruses of "One billion of bottles of beer on the wall," but suffice it to say, he wasn't eager to face death, and that's the way most of us are. And the question is: Why? Isn't the grave simply a passageway to eternity? Isn't that which awaits us far superior to what we have now? Could it be that in despite of our protests to the contrary, we have a subtle fear down in our hearts that the gospel is simply too good to be true. Some people view the grave as an exit off the freeway of life that goes nowhere. That is our fear, but our hopes reside elsewhere. Deep in our hearts is the longing that the bridge of life has been completed, that life goes on, that those we have lost in this world will be reclaimed in the world beyond. That's why, I believe, we make our way to church on Easter Sunday. We come to this place to be reminded that Jesus really did rise from the grave and that because he lives, we too shall live. But how do we know? How do we know the resurrection is true?

On April 15, 1912, the RMS Titanic, the largest passenger steamship in the world at that time, sank in the Atlantic Ocean. The Titanic was on her maiden voyage from Southampton, England, to New York City. The Titanic was designed by some of the most experienced engineers of its time. These engineers used the most advanced technologies available to make it allegedly the safest ship ever built to that time. Many thought it was virtually invincible; thus the world was shocked with the news of its

sinking. Aboard the ship for her maiden voyage were many celebrities: Among them were Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. (hearty laughter) Well, not really, but they certainly brought the tragedy to light on the silver screen.

The sinking of the Titanic is one of the best known events of the twentieth century. But how do we know for sure that the Titanic really sank? Lillian Asplund, the last United States survivor of the Titanic and the last living person to remember it sinking, died in May 2006. Therefore, no one alive today can give us an eyewitness account, so does it mean that it never happened? Of course not. Approximately fifteen hundred passengers drowned in the sea that terrible day, but seven hundred passengers survived. Those survivors were eyewitnesses to the accident, and even though none of them are alive now, newspapers recorded their comments about what they saw. No one today questions whether or not the Titanic sank because we have a record of the eyewitness reports.

Now, how do we know that Jesus rose from the dead? How do we know it's real? Just like we know about the sinking of the Titanic through eyewitness reports. There were people who were there. They saw Jesus; they saw the nail prints in his hands and the mark of the sword in the side that was pierced. Their eyewitness testimonies have been preserved for us in scripture. The Apostle Peter was one of those eyewitnesses. We have his testimony in Acts 10 which Jan just read. He was preaching at Caesarea to a Gentile audience at the home of Cornelius, a Roman army officer. And listen again to his words: "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached; how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead and on the third day caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses who God had already chosen, by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

Simon Peter was there; he was there in the courtyard when Jesus was falsely accused. He was there when they nailed Jesus to the ugly cross. He was there when the women went to the tomb and found it empty. He was there when Jesus appeared after his resurrection to his disciples. He was there. The words from Acts are an eyewitness report. Paul tells us in 1st Corinthians 15 that there were five hundred such eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Eyewitness testimony -- just as convincing as the eyewitnesses to the sinking of the Titanic. No, these witnesses are even more convincing than those of the Titanic. Here's the real proof: These eyewitnesses were so insistent that Jesus rose from the dead that they were willing to die rather than recant their testimony. When they were threatened with death and offered their release if they would deny Jesus, they refused again and again; and for that reason most of them died cruel deaths. Peter was crucified upside down. Paul was beheaded. Thomas was killed with a spear. James was executed

with a sword, and Philip was crucified.

It's hard to dispute the testimony of an eyewitness, particularly one who will die rather than recant his testimony. And why would we want to dispute their testimony? All of creation testifies to the wonder of the resurrection.

At Christ Church in Westerly, Rhode Island, I made a visit to a woman whose husband had died and whose funeral I had been the celebrant at about two months before. It was one of those dark and drizzly days a lot like yesterday. I wasn't even sure if Emma was home. The house was dark and all closed up, and all the blinds and curtains were drawn. I rang the doorbell -- nothing. I knocked and then heard a quiet voice say, "I'll be with you in a minute." Emma finally came to the door. As we walked down the hall to the living room, I couldn't help but notice the whole house was dark; it was all sealed up like a tomb. We sat down and went through those first formalities that you go through when you have guests. And then all of a sudden Emma burst out with a question for me. "Father McGinn, is the resurrection real?" I answered, "Yes!" She asked, "Well, how do you know?" We talked about the passages of scriptures that dealt with the resurrection; we talked about those where Jesus foretold his own death and gave us the promise of the resurrection; we talked about how they had to accept it on faith. It was all very biblical, and it was theologically correct. I had really recited my lessons from seminary well. Evidently, it wasn't enough. With a deep sigh, Emma said, "I want a sign." I told her the only sign I knew of was the empty tomb, and Emma said, "That's not enough; I want more than that." And as we talked the rain had been coming down harder and harder, and it had gotten even darker, and the day matched our moods. I was depressed. I had come to help and hadn't done a very good job. Before I left we prayed, and I prayed for a sign that God would give Emma -- something to ease her grief and to help her know the truth of the resurrection. As we walked down the hall I felt sort of useless because I hadn't been able to reach her. I wanted to help, but I couldn't.

When I opened the door, the first thing I noticed was that it had stopped raining, and the sun was starting to peak out of the clouds. And the sky off in the East was still dark and stormy, but the Western sky was beginning to lighten up. And about the same time that I heard the door close, I looked up, and I immediately turned around and rang the doorbell. The door opened, and I took Emma's hand. I pulled her outside, and I pointed, and we both stood there in stunned silence as we looked at one of the most beautiful rainbows either one of us had ever seen. It was a full horizon-to-horizon rainbow. The colors were brilliant! Emma started crying and so did I; and then I started laughing. She looked at me and through her tears and laughter said, "He's alive!" And she gave me a hug, and immediately ran inside, and she began to open her curtains and blinds.

I'm glad that that rainbow appeared in that sky for Emma; but really, all of creation testifies to the resurrection. The rhythms of winter and springtime, the beauty of the sunset and the certainty of the sunrise. You don't have to be a poet or a painter to recognize that it's all too wondrous to have happen with no design. He's alive! The

birds returning from their winter homes and the tiny buds of the flowers that peak up from the earth so recently cold and lifeless testify to all who will listen. He's alive! All of creation bears eyewitness testimony to the truth of Jesus' resurrection.

But there's one more eyewitness that we need to take into account. It is the testimony of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of those who believe. And Paul writes in Romans 8, "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give light to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you."

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we, you and I, are God's children. This is the ultimate witness to the truth of the resurrection, the Holy Spirit of God lies within each of us. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was never meant to be proved, but experienced. As a matter of fact, it cannot be proved, as no one of us was there; we have to take the word of others who were. Those early witnesses were very passionate about their testimonies. Many were to be martyred in defense of their convictions, but ultimately the resurrection is to be experienced, not proved. The most convincing evidence of the resurrection of Jesus is the transformation of the people who know Jesus and believe in him. I decided long ago the only proof of Easter I will ever need is memory. I remember what my life was like before I met the living Jesus and I know what my life is now as I share it with him and you. I would not stand here and tell you I am always the man that I should be, but thanks to the living Jesus, I am not the man I used to be either. The risen Jesus has made all the difference in my life. Jesus' living within us does make all the difference, and so we come this Easter Sunday to reaffirm with the Bible and creation and our own hearts tell us it's true. Jesus is alive!

I read about a woman who was a member of the choir in her church. One day she was diagnosed with a terminal illness. She lived only a few weeks after that. When her priest visited her in the hospital, she told him that she wanted to be buried in her choir robe. She said, "I've heard that in heaven that all God's children have robes, and I want to take mine just in case." That's how a saint of God faces death -- with humor and anticipation, with joy and expectation -- rather than singing with terror "one billion bottles of beer on the wall, on the wall, one billion bottles of beer on the wall." We sing triumphantly "The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun, Alleluia." Jesus is alive!

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs