

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 16 April 2023
Second Sunday of Easter - Year A

1st Reading: *Acts 2:14a, 22-32*

Psalm: 16

2nd Reading: *1 Peter 1:3-9*

Gospel: *John 20:19-31*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

When I was in high school, after I got home and did all the chores with the chickens, I still had a couple of hours before we ate supper. And it just so happened that during those couple of hours, our local TV station showed reruns of two shows that I particularly enjoyed, and indeed, they are probably still two of my most favourite TV shows. One was Star Trek. That probably isn't a big surprise to anyone.

The other one was Perry Mason, and I think what intrigued me most about Perry Mason was how it emphasised real laws and the real procedures used in law courts. I know that many things have changed in the sixty years since Perry Mason was being filmed, but most of the law court procedures are still the same.

And today there are other types of TV shows that illustrate this. I would hardly rate it anywhere near Perry Mason, but I do confess that from time to time, not very often but from time to time, I have been known to watch Judge Judy. And again, one of the things that I find interesting about Judge Judy is that, because she was an actual judge, she knows the laws and how court procedures work.

The key thing for both Perry Mason and for Judge Judy for determining what is the truth. There may be physical evidence. Perry Mason may find that the shoe-prints left in the mud at the scene of the murder match perfectly the shoes of someone who thought they had pulled off the perfect crime. And Judge Judy may base her decision on the fact that the person in question can produce bank records that prove they had, indeed, paid their full rent in January, February, and March.

Or there may be evidence from eye-witnesses. Perry Mason may find that several people saw a woman leave the scene of the crime, or a witness may describe to Judge Judy how they saw a car in the wrong lane that then struck another car.

The entire New Testament talks about evidence and about eye-witness testimonies, especially in relationship to who Jesus is, and in regard to his resurrection. It isn't a comfy-cozy story about how nice Jesus makes us feel. It starts with cold hard facts about torture and death, about people's pains and sorrows and about persecutions because certain people know those facts to be true.

But in the midst of that harsh reality and darkness, there is a surprising light that shines. Yet it isn't a pretend light, born of wishful thinking. It isn't that if we have faith in the future then everything will turn out all right. No, that surprising light is just as much of an historical fact as the sorrows and the darkness.

And so the New Testament is all about the historical evidence that this light, the light of the Messiah, Jesus, is absolutely true. And nowhere is this emphasis on evidence and eye-witness testimony more important than in the Gospel of John. The word "sign", meaning evidence, appears 17 times in his Gospel, and the words "testify" or "testimony" or "witness" appear 46 times. John's Gospel begins with the testimony of John the Baptist, and ends with the disciple John writing about himself saying: "This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true."

And so, in today's reading, all this evidence and eye-witness testimony comes to a head. The ten disciples (minus Judas and Thomas) who saw Jesus on the evening of the first Easter Sunday had the physical evidence of Jesus' own body. They could see that it was he, that he still had the wounds of the crucifixion in his resurrected body. They heard his voice and felt his breath. Cold hard evidence.

But when they told Thomas, he refused to believe them. He was skeptical and doubted the possibility of Jesus' resurrection. He refused to accept the eye-witness testimony of the ten people he knew and trusted the most. (Now, of course, it is possible for a group of people to decide to lie and bear false witness, but why would the other disciples have played such a trick on Thomas?)

And yet Thomas said that he wouldn't believe it until he had seen it for himself. He wanted to examine the physical evidence for himself, by putting his fingers in the wounds in Jesus' hands, and his own hand in Jesus' side. Otherwise, he would not believe.

Well, a week later he did see for himself and did believe. But Jesus chided him, saying: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Now this does not mean that we should not look for evidence of the truth of Christianity, or for proof of God, or that we should simply have blind faith in something that doesn't make any sense, just because it might make us feel good. We are not talking about blind faith here, we are talking about what kind of evidence is valid for determining truth.

Just as Perry Mason and Judge Judy can determine what is true based on eye-witness testimony, so Thomas, and we, have every reason to take seriously what we hear from people we have known closely for years, and whose word has proved to be true time and time again,

So it is here that Thomas fell down. It isn't that he wanted evidence that Jesus had been resurrected, it is that he rejected the very good evidence he had been given, and demanded a different form of proof instead. He should have trusted the word of the other disciples. But Jesus was gracious to him, and allowed him to become an eyewitness himself, since that was the role Jesus had trained him for from the beginning.

We, however, fall into the category of those who are not personally eye-witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. But we don't need to be skeptical or doubt. We can rationally and critically accept the evidence that has been presented to us by those who were eye-witnesses, especially in the light of other evidence, including the continuing presence of God in the church through the Holy Spirit.

So we do not believe in Jesus in spite of the evidence, but because of it. Our faith is not just wishful thinking or blind faith. It is not opposed to reason, but goes hand in hand with it. And this neither diminishes our faith or our reason, but gives us a firm foundation for our entire lives as Christians and our life together as the church. And so as this Easter season continues, we continue to affirm that Christ is risen! Alleluia!

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