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Sermon Text: Introductory Devotion to Acts 26:19-29

One would expect Paul to have been frightened, at least intimidated. Though he had done nothing against Roman law, the governor refused him justice in favor of the Jewish leaders who wanted Paul dead.

Now the Apostle stands before King Agrippa II, who came from the notorious 'Herod' family. This Agrippa in our reading is the son of the leader who killed the Apostle James and tried to have the Apostle Peter put to death. His great uncle was Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist. His great grandfather was Herod the Great who had tried to kill the Christ child by murdering the baby boys of Bethlehem.

So Paul is not among friends here. After this ordeal, he will be shipped off to Rome to stand trial before the Emperor. So here he stands before mighty people with the power to harm him. Does he cower? Does he hold his tongue or bow and scrape?

No. He conducts an evangelism call! He preaches and proclaims God's truth not just to **the great**, to the Governor, the King, the Roman military tribunes and prominent leaders of Caesarea, but also to the **small**, to palace guards, servants, and attendants standing in the background.

He speaks of people needing God, needing to repent and turn to God because they are all sinners. He tells them they are lost in the dark without the risen Jesus. He points to Christ risen from the grave as the Light of peace and life for Jew and Gentile alike.

In the midst of what amounts to a sort of inquisition, that would leave most people trembling, Paul eagerly preaches an outreach sermon! He longs that those who hear him would trust in Christ as the Savior.

Paul is bold, because he knows Jesus is alive. He knows the Christ whom he preaches rose from the dead and stands behind this message of human sin and the Lord's grace. He is bold not of his own strength, but as he says, because he **has help from God**.

Paul knows there is no real and lasting harm that any man can do to him. Even if He loses his life for preaching Christ, something that will eventually happen to him, yet he knows Jesus will not only bring him safely to his heavenly kingdom, but will also raise his body to life at the last day and keep that promise the Lord gives in the Gospel: that even believers who die for their faith, yet in the end will not lose even a single hair on their head, because Jesus lives victorious from the dead, so will all who trust in Him!

Easter certainty took away Paul's fears. Paul knows Jesus lives from sight. He had seen the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and through His Word, the Lord changed a man who tried hard to wipe out Christianity to be an Apostle and missionary who would testify before kings and governors!

Paul, a former Pharisee and student of the Old Testament also knows Jesus lives from Scripture. Centuries ahead of time, **Moses** and the **prophets** had foretold in great detail the suffering and resurrection of Jesus. Since God kept that promise, Paul knew the Lord will keep every promise, like that His word will not return to Him empty and that the risen Jesus will be with His people to give them strength in every hardship.

Fear will die beneath Easter certainty, the bright light of Jesus' victory over death scatters the darkness of doubt, uncertainty, and timidity. The same risen Jesus who sent Paul to testify to **small and great** also sends you and me, saying, "**You will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth.**"

Don't ask the question, could I be as courageous as Paul to speak of Christ to people in my life. Instead ask how will the risen Jesus through His Word **help** me to tell others about His saving work? Jesus' victory over death is your victory, and that therefore there is no real and lasting harm any human being can do to you. If death cannot harm those who are in Christ, then neither can an awkward conversation, an insult thrown at us or even rejection when we invite others. Let us join **Paul** in praying that God would give faith in Jesus to all who listen.

Acts 26:19-29

¹⁹“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. ²⁰Rather, I first told those in Damascus and Jerusalem about it, and then throughout the entire country of Judea and also the Gentiles. I told them that they should repent and turn to God, while also doing works that are consistent with repentance. ²¹These are the reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.

²²“But I have had help from God right up to this day, and so I stand testifying to both small and great. I am saying nothing other than what the prophets and Moses said would happen, ²³that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light to our people and to the Gentiles.”

²⁴While Paul was saying these things in his defense, Festus shouted, “Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you insane.”

²⁵But Paul replied, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus, but I am clearly speaking words that are true and sensible. ²⁶Certainly the king to whom I am freely speaking knows about these things. Indeed, I cannot believe that any of these things has escaped his notice, because this has not been done in a corner. ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.”

²⁸Then Agrippa said to Paul, “In such a short time are you going to persuade me to become a Christian?”

²⁹Paul replied, “I pray God, that whether in a short time or a long time, not only you, but also all those who are listening to me today would become what I am, except for these chains.”

Introductory Devotion to 1 Corinthians 15:12-22

The Easter hymn goes: ***He lives to silence all my fears*** (CW 152:5).

Because Jesus rose from the dead, we know He has truly paid for our sins, they can no longer accuse us. Believers *have* peace with God. Jesus lives to silence the fears of guilt, shame and the eternal punishment we deserve.

Because Jesus lives, we know every promise of the Bible is true, He will indeed be with us and take care of us every day, doing what His perfect Wisdom knows will be best for us in the eternal scheme of things. Because Jesus lives He will bring us safely through death to heaven's mansions and then will raise our bodies up to life eternal!

Oh yes, **He lives to silence all my fears!**

But what *if* Jesus does not live? What *if* Jesus did not rise? Then all that comfort and peace is gone. Then we stand under God's eternal judgment. Fear of every kind wins. It's a terrifying thought, one the devil loves to inject into our hearts with fear and doubt.

So why would Jesus' apostle bring it up in our next lesson? Through Paul, the Holy Spirit lays it out clearly: *If* Jesus did not rise, our faith is worthless, we are liars, and are the **most pitiful people of all**.

Who talks like this when they want to make an important point? Who sets up a target that if it were hit would completely destroy everything you're promoting?

Have you ever heard an evolutionary scientist on Nova, or the Discovery channel, say, well you know if it turns out I'm wrong, and there is a God who can is almighty and creates things, well then my whole theory about the origin of the world which is based on there not being a God and things occurring naturally on their own is nothing but a an educated fairytale.

They don't talk that way, do they, even though it is true, that the existence of God makes even the most intricate and impressive evolutionary arguments utterly invalid. But how rarely do such TV scientists talk openly about their flawed assumptions. If they did, they would have to admit that all they are saying is based upon assumptions that are not a hard science, but that they are following a philosophy, a religion, since it has assumptions that cannot be proven empirically.

Or what politician says, "Here's my platform of great ideas, but you know it's always possible that my great ideas won't actually work and I won't solve all the world's problems any more than any other politician in human history..."

No, that is not the way so called experts talk. They like to steer clear of any possible weakness in their arguments.

But Paul doesn't hesitate to do this. The Bible doesn't hesitate to actually invite you to prove that everything it says wrong by just getting rid of Jesus rising from the dead.

Hmmm, why can Paul dare to do this? Why would the Holy Spirit speak in such a way? Could it be, because the Bible has nothing to hide, nothing to be afraid of when Paul says "**if Christ has not been raised.**" Of course Scripture speaks this way, because ***in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.***

In other words, Paul can happy throw out his "ifs" in the next lesson because he knows they are nothing but "ifs". The reality. The history. The fact. The truth is Jesus ***Christ has been raised from the dead.***

Earlier in the chapter, Paul gives a partial lists of the eye-witnesses to the resurrection, including 500 who all saw him at the same time.

What's even more interesting, is that the vast majority of scholars, including those who don't believe in Jesus, accept that Paul's letters are authentic and that 1st Corinthians was written around AD 50, just 30 years after the resurrection.

In other words, Paul is putting out there at a time when people could actually investigate and interview hundreds of people who had seen Jesus risen, and is essentially saying: 'go ahead, check it out, try to prove the resurrection wrong, I dare you. But you won't, because ***in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.***'

And then there are plenty of modern examples like Lee Strobel, an atheist who did the research to disprove Christ and instead ended up being brought to faith in Christ. But that's not surprising, when we remember that passages like 1 Corinthians 15 are not merely powerful proofs to the resurrection, but are actually the powerful, living and active Word of God. And through that Word, the Holy Spirit creates Easter Certainty to ***silences all our fears.***

1 Corinthians 15:12-22

¹²Now if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how is it that some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is pointless, and your faith is pointless too. ¹⁵Then we are even guilty of giving false testimony about God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he

did not raise, if it were true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then it also follows that those who fell asleep in Christ perished. ¹⁹If our hope in Christ applies only to this life, we are the most pitiful people of all.

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came by a man, the resurrection of the dead also is going to come by a man. ²²For as in Adam they all die, so also in Christ they all will be made alive.

Introductory Devotion to John 20:19-31

There have been many who have tried to come up with all kinds of explanations to dismiss the notion of Jesus' rising from the dead.

But they all fall flat, like the Jewish leaders first attempt to cover up the resurrection by bribing the guards to say they fell asleep and Jesus body was stolen. What a ridiculous cover up! Everyone knew that Roman soldiers sleeping on duty are killed, so the only possible reason the guards would tell such a story was if it was a cover up with the Jewish leaders keeping their bargain to keep the guards out of trouble if the **if the governor hears about it.** (Mt 28) Far from disproving the resurrection, it only adds more evidence that it is real!

So it is with those who come up with theories to discredit the disciples eyes witness by saying they just imagined the resurrection, a case of wishful thinking. You see, by making such theories they show how powerful and frequent this eye-witness testimony is that they want to dismiss it somehow. That evidence simply can't just be ignored.

But like the rest, that theory is full of holes, for the disciples weren't expecting the resurrection! The disciples sure weren't hiding behind locked doors because they were confident Jesus was alive to protect them!

Luke's gospel records how Jesus said to them, **Why are you troubled? Why do doubts arise in your hearts?** That's why Jesus shows them his hands and his side. There is no mass hallucination here, the disciples one and all need to be convinced, and are convinced, including Thomas!

Yes, good old doubting Thomas right? First let's all agree to be a little kinder to Thomas shall we? After all, we all have our own sins, faults and failings that we need Jesus' death and resurrection to save us from. If the Holy Spirit had put us into the Bible with all our faults, wouldn't there be plenty of words He could have attached to us, like "worrying Wilma" or "Poor at praying Poe" or "impatient Igor." Thank God the Lord hasn't done that and Christ forgives us!

Second, let's thank God for Thomas and his skepticism along with Jesus' mercy and the Holy Spirit's faith giving work that turned Thomas' 'not unless I see it' into '**My Lord and my God.**'

That even Thomas is convinced is another certainty of the resurrection, just as are the countless millions over two millennia who were brought to believe by the **power of God for salvation** that is the **Gospel** (Romans 1:16), given in this book that is **written** that **you may believe.**

And this book is after all the ultimate Easter Certainty under which Fear will die: the powerful Word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to bring people to faith and keep them in faith, calming our troubled hearts with Jesus' word of peace. And then the day will come when we who have been blessed to have believed without seeing will see, hear, taste, smell and feel with every fiber of our being the resurrection Peace, where every sorrow and fear will die forever, for **by believing you have life in His name!**

John 20:19-31

¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you.” ²²After saying this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³Whenever you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

²⁴But Thomas, one of the Twelve, the one called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples kept telling him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶After eight days, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and look at my hands. Take your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue to doubt, but believe.”

²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰Jesus, in the presence of his disciples, did many other miraculous signs that are not written in this book.

³¹But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.