



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen. Please be seated.

Over the past week, I've been revisiting a memory that I had when I was a seminarian about 35 years ago. I had chosen to pursue the priesthood at 25 years old, and I was excited about that choice. It seemed like the right choice. I might have had some other options, but I chose that path. And I was at a seminary in Alexandria, Virginia that was known as being a beautiful, wonderful seminary. And there was a congregation that I was desperate to serve as an intern. It was literate, articulate, intellectual, artistic, wonderfully engaged, much like you might say, Christ Church Cranbrook. And so I was invited out by the leadership of that parish and we had an interview. And at the end of the interview, they asked me if I had any questions. And I said, do you believe in the resurrection? And they answered once a year. And I said, that is 364 days too few.

Shockingly, the interview did not go well and I did not get the internship, but I look back on my younger self, much like we all look back on our younger selves sometimes with a bit of compassion, some self-compassion, sometimes with a bit of forgiveness of who we were at the time. I look back on my 25-year-old self and I remain proud. Because I went to seminary because I had found my faith in Christ, I had found my faith in Christ at a time when I needed to know Christ intimately and personally. I found my way to Christ in the midst of depression and suicidality, and I had turned my life around.

And yes, the people around me marveled at the fact that I had found meaning and purpose in my life. That's what the psychiatrist told me, but it really was this: I had discovered the living relationship that I had with Jesus Christ and that Jesus Christ was alive. It wasn't just meaning. It wasn't just purpose. This was a living Savior who was alive and in my life, and bringing me forth and giving me hope, and giving me strength, and giving me love. That Jesus was alive because He had been risen from the dead. That is what my faith was at 25, and it is still my faith today. And my greatest hope for you, my greatest wish for you, my greatest prayer for you is that you see the resurrection 365 or 366 days a year because that resurrection is real, that God is real, that testimony can be trusted, and that is the truth around which everything hangs in the Christian faith.

I am so grateful for my 25-year-old self that I said that at the time. And I found this faith in the Episcopal Church. It wasn't through another church with another kind of worship. The Episcopal church taught me that faith in a resurrection, and I dedicated myself to learning the hymns of this great church tradition. The first that I dedicated myself to learning we sang this Holy Week. It's hymn 707, Take My Life and Let It Be.

Take my life and let it be  
consecrated, Lord, to thee.  
Take my moments and my days;  
let them flow in ceaseless praise.  
Take my hands and let them move  
at the impulse of thy love.  
Take my heart, it is thine own;  
it shall be thy royal throne.

Those hymns kept me going. And Episcopalians were trying at the time to somehow update their liturgy, which in that context meant that the priest would put on a cable net sweater and play a guitar. I didn't want anything to do with that kind of Christianity. I wanted to know the hymns. I wanted to meet the faith of Charles Wesley, who would articulate things. Brilliant Isaac Watts. They knew their redeemer as a risen Lord, and I shared in their faith and that is the faith that has sustained me. And it sustained me in the midst of all the work that I've done in religious studies, all the many writings that have tried to undermine our faith in the resurrection, all the theories of what actually happened to Jesus that secular scholars developed over the years.

Theories like the stolen body, which actually emerged only 50 or so years after Jesus was risen. There are people that said the disciples snuck in and stole the body of Jesus. I don't know about you, but have you ever met a disciple of Christ? They have a great difficulty with collective action. Do you really think the disciples as described could manage that? Do you think any of us could manage it? It's beyond comprehension.

There were some that said Jesus swooned, He passed out on the cross, and the Romans who were professional executioners were duped, and they thought he had swooned. And then He got into the grave, they put a large stone there, and then He got better. And then He had the strength to push the stone away because you know, after you've been hanging on a cross for three hours, bleeding yourself out, of course you have the strength to push your way out and then figure out a way to hide while you continue to heal.

There are those who say that the resurrection was this mass hallucination, that there was this moment a little bit like some people are celebrating this date in Ann Arbor with marijuana on the day called 4/20. That they all got really high and

then they were like, you know what? I have a great idea. He was raised from the dead. And they're like, that's super brilliant.

All of those theories I was taught as a kind of orthodoxy that I had to believe. I did not believe any of them. Why? Because I knew enough about my own education that you do not trust a theory about Jesus that doesn't demand change of you. And what holds all of those skeptical writings about Jesus is they all demand nothing of the reader. They all say that His life amounted to nothing. But I knew in the core of my being that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Jesus had the power over death and sin and the grave. Jesus had claimed my life. Jesus loved me and I was not going to let go of that.

And my hope for you today is that you do not let go of that. Do not fall prey to these clever myths. Do not fall prey to these things that are said to get you to click on the link and follow your way to some kind of cleverly devised theory about what actually happened to Jesus. The only thing we know about Jesus is that we are told He was raised from the dead. And the only thing we can hold onto as Christians is the fact that Christ is alive in us today. It's because of that resurrection that you and I have this relationship with Jesus. This is why Paul says in Galatians, "It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me." That was the truth of my life. That has been the truth of my life. That is the guiding star of my life. That is the energy of my life. That is the spirit that runs through my life. I live because Christ lives in me.

And that is what we are called to be as Christians. Do not accept anything else because that transformation has been powerful. I've seen it in these Episcopal churches I've had the privilege of serving. I've seen it when people have had to clean out the closets of a child who is lost to an overdose and could say, hallelujah! Christ is risen! in the midst of that pain. I've seen it in the midst of suffering when we lose loved ones and people are grieving profoundly where they can say, hallelujah! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen, indeed! I've seen it in people struggling with addiction that is crippling and devious and finding ways to continue to trip them up. And when they find their way to God, they can say, hallelujah! Christ is risen. The Lord has risen, indeed! I've seen it in your life. I've seen it in mine, in that ability to somehow trust in the moment and define God who has been searching for us from day one to find in that risen Christ, a relationship with Jesus.

Now, there are three things I want to lift up for you today in our scriptures. The first is that this reading from Luke is about the empty tomb. There are two traditions of the resurrection that are put side by side because they both identify critical truths about what it means to worship a risen Lord and savior Jesus. And the empty tomb tradition is the belief that when Jesus rises from the dead, He ascends to the Father and now lives through us through the Spirit.

This is why Paul says in Galatians, "It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me." When Jesus has His body assumed into Heaven, we now become the body of Christ through the Spirit. And this is part of what it means to follow Jesus. The other part is the appearance tradition where we touch and see Jesus. We touch His wounds and where He eats fish. And that's to assure us that that Christ who is by the Father's side is present with us in flesh and blood. And that empty tomb is meant to remind us that Christ lives in us today.

One of my favorite signs when I was teaching in Tennessee at the University of the South, I loved when I would go through these little towns and see the little roadside, the little marquees that they would put in front of these churches that had been put together by these beautiful people who had to borrow the nails through which they built those churches. And they were so faithful and they would take lumber that had been donated or given as a tithe and make these churches. And they would have these little proud signs that would be so beautiful.

My favorite one is I was driving by one and it said in the midst of summer in Tennessee, when it was hotter than Hades, it said, "This church is prayer conditioned." And all I could think of myself is nice try. I love that minister. I'd never met him because I probably couldn't last 10 minutes in his church, it would be so hot. But one that I saw in Tennessee that went right with the grain of this reading from Luke, it simply said "He ain't here. He is risen." He ain't here. Let the spirit of Christ be in you. First point.

Second point is look at how the women trust the memory of Jesus. This is a signal to you and I to get to know the scriptures. The scriptures tell us everything about who Jesus is. It's not a one-to-one thing, it's not a linear thing. But when you read the prophecies in the Hebrew Bible, they tell of a God, a Messiah who is going to come and be a suffering servant and somehow lead us to a promised land. And that comes to truth in Jesus Christ. One of the readings that we had last night during our Easter vigil was from Ezekiel 37, and it's where the prophet is taken by the Lord to a great vast valley in which there are dry bones. And the Lord asks the prophet, son of man, will these bones live? And the prophet says, you know, oh Lord, whether they will live. And then the Lord invited the prophet to prophesy. And the first prophecy brings bones together, and the second prophecy brings flesh on the bones. But then the third prophecy brings the spirit.

And in your art today that I have from a Jewish artist, David Bomberg, there's this beautiful moment, it's called The Vision of Ezekiel. He did it in 1912, and this is actually a kind of social critique of the materialism of the early 20th century. And Bomberg is showing all of these and it's called The Vision of Ezekiel. Bomberg is showing all of these bodies wrestling as they are coming to life. And he writes in his explanation of it, this is between the second prophecy and the third prophecy in Ezekiel. They have a body. They have flesh and blood, but they have no life in them because they have not received the spirit. That is what is at work in our

reading today from Luke. That is what it means when we say He is risen and the body's not here. It's meant to invite us to know that spirit. That is what it means to trust the readings and the memories, not only of what Jesus says, but all the prophecies about Jesus.

And finally, in our reading today from Luke, we have testimony. The women bear witness to an encounter with God and they bring that testimony to the men. And shockingly, the men do not believe them. John Calvin, the great reformer, believed that Jesus and God purposely chose in the design of providence to pick women to be the witnesses to the resurrection because God knew that even though women in that society were held low, that women were more trustworthy. John Calvin said that around 1535. You and I need to listen to the testimony of others. When the road gets hard for us, when we falter in our faith, when we are consumed with doubt, when we are immersed in pain, when we are grieving, when we are struggling, you and I need to trust the testimony of others and to believe them. Believe what they're saying to know that this Jesus is real. This resurrection is real. That you can trust them, trust them, trust them this day. If you do not have that faith and lean into Jesus, I promise you you'll experience the resurrection.

Amen.