

## What Do You Believe?

*Matthew 28:1-10 ~ April 16, 2017 (Easter Sunday) ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

What do you believe? Did OJ do it? On October 3, 1995 a jury in Los Angeles Superior Court ruled that OJ Simpson was innocent of murdering Nicole Brown and her friend Ron Goldman on June 12, 1994. The eleven month trial was perhaps the single most publicized legal proceeding in American history. Many books, articles, and video productions have resulted from this event. A simple search on YouTube results in over 800,000 hits.

Why is this issue an open question? The case was tried. A verdict was pronounced. That should be the end of it, shouldn't it? Well, it seems that is not the way this cookie crumbles. For a generation people have been asking, "Did OJ do it?" Most experts agree that the prosecution's case and the evidence they presented would have overwhelmingly brought a conviction in most cases. However, the defense's success in turning the case into a contest about racial discrimination and the impending threat of riots are generally agreed to have become factors in the jury's final decision. Even so, the subsequent civil trial did reverse the decision awarding punitive damages against Simpson for wrongful death. So which trial do you believe?

In the pair of decades since the OJ Simpson trial, countless individuals have considered what they actually believe. Some have reviewed the evidence, the media footage, and the multitudinous literature on the internet in an attempt to decide for themselves what they believe about OJ Simpson. Did he do it?

You may find it a relief to know that this sermon is not really about our personal convictions regarding OJ Simpson's guilt or innocence. But it is about the nature of belief itself. It is particularly concerned with our beliefs about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In our day and age, belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the event we celebrate today, has become a matter of **casual consideration** like the question, "Did OJ do it?" Did Jesus rise from the dead? The person on the street has a ready answer to that question. Many will say no, it could not be true. When asked why, they quote the general principle that the dead do not return to life. They may also say nobody really believes that. Sometimes they claim that such miracles cannot happen. Whatever path

the unbeliever takes it amounts to pretty much the same thing. The reason for not believing in the resurrection of Jesus is what is called a tautology. It means a circular argument that proves something simply by stating it. In other words they do not believe in the resurrection because they do not believe in it. Almost everyone can see the problem with this kind of thinking. However, because so many fail to see why the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so important they fail to question their own faulty logic.

So let's move to the other side of the argument. What about those who say they believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. If asked, many would use the same kind of tautology to explain their faith. In other words they believe in the resurrection of Jesus because they believe in it. It is common to hear this supported by such statements as: "I just know in my heart that Jesus was raised from the dead;" or "It has been revealed to me that Jesus was raised from the dead."

Whereas these statements are appropriate expressions of worship, they can become counterproductive when it comes to the matter of witnessing to faith in the resurrection. Especially when in the company of those who do not believe we must go beyond an emotional basis for faith. It is vital that we move to a rational approach that sets faith in the resurrection upon factual evidence.

It sometimes catches Christians off guard to realize that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is perhaps the single best documented event prior to about 1500 AD. The case that is presented by the New Testament and a scattering of other ancient writings is simply overwhelming when it is looked at carefully. In fact the evidence about the resurrection actually surpasses the prosecution's evidence in the OJ Simpson case. In that trial the lack of eye-witness testimony was the key element that hampered the prosecution's case. Saint Paul summarized the eye witness testimony to the resurrection in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 where he says:

***For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.***

We don't have just one or two witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We don't have just a dozen eye witnesses. We literally have hundreds of witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What do you think the verdict would have been for OJ if the prosecution would have been able to produce even a dozen witnesses to the crime he was accused of? It is not too hard to figure out. However, so many members of our culture gloss over the hundreds of witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. One has to wonder why that is so?

It is because over the centuries many attempts have been made to discredit the clear witness of the New Testament to the resurrection of Jesus. Some claim that the ancient writers had little interest in stating the story in the factual style of modern history. One doesn't need to spend much time perusing the fake news of our modern Internet to get a jaded opinion of what factual style exists in our modern world today. But in the case of the different testimonies to the resurrection we find in the New Testament, the level of detail and the ring of truth is very evident. It is evident for even the casual reader to see, if they look. Even the differences between the various testimonies do not form meaningful contradictions, but rather portray a clear honest presentation of witnesses telling the story from their own perspectives. No attempt was made to harmonize them so that the true witness to the central claim is clear, Jesus lives again. He is risen!

Another way that critics attempt to undermine the factual basis of the resurrection is to question the validity of the transmission of the New Testament Scriptures as it moved from copy to copy. Many people are unaware that the text of the New Testament is supported by actual documents of such numbers and dating so close to the original writing that the factual proof of the transmission accuracy is about ten times any other document from the ancient world. We can be perfectly certain that what we read about the witness to the resurrection of Jesus is better than 99.95% accurate to what was originally written by the apostles. In the era of internet forwards, facebook reposts, and endless likes this percentage of accuracy seems truly remarkable, not to mention, helpful. Do not be misled by those who want to undermine the Bible on the basis of literary transmission or translation. Anyone, who takes the time to look, will realize that the accuracy of the words we hold in our hands as we read the Bible is nothing short of miraculous. And this reality is attested by the academic community that makes its living researching such things. The truth is that every effort to undermine the clear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ is doomed from the start. That witness is self evident in itself for anyone who cares to look at it closely.

The point of all this is that believing is not only thing that matters. We must also know with our minds why we believe. We live in an age where feelings are touted as the most crucial aspect of faith. And it must be said that faith is something we should feel. But it is still vital to believe because of what we know with our minds. The mission that Jesus set for his disciples was to witness to the truth. That is fundamentally a mental process that presents evidence on which people can come to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, Savior, and King. Out of that mental acknowledgement flows the feelings of faith in certainty, grace, and confidence. Without the intellectual rigor of the proofs of the resurrection in the witness of the apostles we have little more than a cultic heritage. But in these proofs our minds, hearts, spirits, and souls are engaged by the real work of Christ, on the cross and risen from the grave.

Many wonder what we should be saying to others when we go, make, baptize and teach. It is relatively simple. The witness we are called to bear is about the resurrection of Jesus. It is the Easter message. We do not need to invent clever ways to convince our neighbors of the truth about Jesus. We simply need to invite them to put the resurrection of Jesus on trial. Encourage them to study the evidence and make up their own minds. St. Luke explains this when he tells of the work of St Paul in the book of Acts:

***Paul went in(to the synagogues), as was his custom, and .... reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."***

Paul reasoned with those he was called to witness to. His reasoning, along with the witness of those who saw Jesus rise from the dead, lives on the pages of our Bibles. Our part in the mission of the church is simple. We need to know and understand this word of God so that we can share it clearly with our neighbors, family and friends. Not to push them, or Bible thump them, but to encourage them to consider the evidence for themselves. What do you suppose would happen to us as a congregation if we did this one thing. What would happen if we put aside any concern for budget or facilities and gave ourselves completely to knowing God's word in support of the investigation of the truth? What if we sacrificed everything to put the evidence, the proof of the resurrection before our community, our friends, and our families? What if we could

simply give them a chance to reach a verdict about the truth of the resurrection of Jesus?

Are you ready for that kind of challenge? What do you believe? Are you ready to look closely at the evidence and decide for yourself? I promise that God's word is there and it is true. Search it for yourself. Read the living witness of those who saw Jesus alive from the Dead. Listen to those who walked with him and talked to him alive after his death on the cross. What does it mean for you that Jesus has risen from the Dead? What does it mean for you that Jesus is the first born of the sons and daughters of God? What does it mean that Jesus has chosen you to believe in him? What does it mean that you too shall live forever and will be resurrected from the dead, just like Jesus? Stand on his grace! Open the Holy Scriptures! Believe his word!

***But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead***

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.