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Sermon Title: The Proof of Life
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

It's been a long winter, hasn't it? Even if you're skiers or pond hockey players, it has been a long, hard winter outside. Even inside. If you were inside this church during Lent, some weeks were pretty hard. My last three sermons during Lent were first, confronting the evil of ISIS, then a sermon on dying, then a sermon on death. People began calling the church on Friday to see if Alida was preaching, hoping for something a bit brighter.

We did promise that we were laying the groundwork for Easter. We promised that facing the starkness of evil and dying and death would make Easter joy even greater. Today we put that promise to the test. Can we deliver to you the joy of Easter even with harsh reality all around us?

If not, we should just sing a hymn and go home, sell the church, and then call it quits. But we're *not* going home, we are *not* calling it quits . . . for the

simple reason that the promises of Easter are what get us through the harsh winters of our lives, the storms and blizzards that upset our routine, the slippery conditions that threaten to upend us, take us down; the coldness of life that chills our spirit. We've felt that in all the hurt and all the losses and all the disappointments. And still we believe in spring, still we believe in Resurrection, still we believe in God's love, Christ, triumphing over early death.

In today's brief Easter messages, Alida and I will look at the two sides of Easter, "The Proof of Life" and "The Life of Proof." "The proof of life," what convinced those folks 2,000 years AGO that Jesus lives! And "the life of proof," what do we do that convinces folks 2,000 years LATER that Jesus lives?

Television has been having competing "Jesus" shows. CNN's is called "Finding Jesus." Fox News is pushing "Killing Jesus." Another news show was pushing the discovery of "the ossuary of St. James," The box of bones belonging to James, the brother of Jesus. The announcer proclaimed with great seriousness "This box of bones is the only proof that Jesus ever existed." I guess the idea is that if people bothered to keep the bones of James that James must have been pretty important, and if what made James important was his brother Jesus, then Jesus must have existed. Truth is, every spring TV embraces Jesus. Then TV goes silent on Jesus until December, when we get the Grinch and Charlie Brown.

For us, Easter is proof that Jesus is important year-round, not only that he existed, but also that his existence is the central story in human history AND that his existence is the key to our existence in this life and the next; AND all that hinges on one thing: Jesus's resurrection from the dead.

The obvious question is "How do we know?" After all, dead is dead. And the idea that who was dead, Jesus, is suddenly up and about, walking and talking, cooking and eating—which is what Jesus did—that's a stretch. Yet, that's the central teaching of our church. Aside from that, yes, Jesus was a nice guy. He said some really good stuff. So did Buddha. So did Confucius. Confucius said the Golden Rule 500 years before Jesus did. Being nice, talking "good," inspiring others. That is wonderful. It is not why the church is full today.

Jesus did something with death that had never been done before. And here is my "proof of life." We know Jesus was raised from the dead because his closest friends and relatives said so. And they had no earthly reason for making that up. I do. I have a lot to gain! All this Easter hope keeps this church active, well funded. We live in a nice house, we get a good salary,

we've got a great vacation coming up. We have a nice life, thanks to that Easter story. "Thank you, Jesus," and I mean that seriously.

But step back in time. Jesus was crucified as a criminal, a rabble-rouser, an enemy of the state, a political traitor, a religious heretic, a disturber of the peace. Any connection to him was dangerous, literally life-threatening. The people who followed Jesus had no power, no influence, no protection. The smart thing for them would have been to keep their heads down, their mouths shut, go back to their home village, blend into the background, and hope nobody ratted them out.

Instead, one by one, they were confronted by the impossible. Jesus. Alive. Jesus met them. Talked with them. He confronted their skepticism, their doubts, their guilt, their fears. Jesus challenged them to believe the unbelievable. And he did it in a way designed to overcome their very reasonable doubts. He was persistent and varied and physical. By that I mean he showed up again and again; he showed up in different places to different people; and he showed up in person, not a ghost, not a disembodied voice. He took away, one by one, all the arguments against the resurrection. Like maybe it was "groupthink," or mass hysteria. Or wish-fulfillment. Or maybe it was a dastardly conspiracy theory hatched by entrepreneurial Galilean fisherman to create a world religion. Or grave robbers or body snatchers or silly hysterical women.

These are all popular theories. It's what people said back then. It's what people say today, and why not? Each theory is more reasonable than a dead man walking out of his tomb, meeting up with his buddies, cooking breakfast for his friends, showing up at their homes, giving advice on their careers, answering their questions. Embracing them, reconciling with them, and then sending them into the world to risk their lives for him.

What skeptics forget is that 2,000 years ago there wasn't anyone, not anyone in that first generation of believers, for whom there was any benefit in believing. No one had anything to gain, not even wish fulfillment, because no one was even wishing; and no one believed it. Not Mary. Not Peter. Not John. Not one of them expected it.

When one of the women met Jesus on Easter, she thought he was the gardener! When the women believed, the disciples thought the women were hysterical. When the disciples started to believe, Thomas thought they were nuts. The most honest one in the bunch is the one we call "Doubting Thomas" because he stuck to his doubts. "Unless I can touch them," Thomas said, "unless I can personally put my finger right into Jesus's wounds, unless I can feel and see and hear, I will not believe." An entirely reasonable

opinion. And so, unreasonably, impossibly, Jesus shows up, reaches out his hands and invites Thomas to undoubt himself. You think Thomas got spiritually bullied into believing? O.K., but here's the skeptic in me about the skeptics. What did the people who believed stand to gain? Nothing. They were up against power, against common sense, against tradition, against safety and security, against self-interest!

Here's what I don't think. I don't think a bunch of middle-aged men, mostly fishermen, and a few women sat around in their upper room hideout the day after Jesus was crucified and hatched a plot to take over the religious world. By sneaking up on the tomb, overpowering the squad of Roman soldiers, stealing the body, and then hanging out in the main square of Jerusalem, defying the Roman Empire by declaring Jesus was alive. I don't think they sat around and wrote a Bible just to pull our legs and see how far their joke could go. They believed it. Doubting Thomas took the Easter story all the way to India, where he died telling everyone about eternal life.

All those early believers, they ended up persecuted, hunted, imprisoned, martyred. All because something happened that Easter, something happened in that garden on the road to Emmaus, in the little room in Jerusalem, at the seashore of Galilee, on the hillside in Bethany.

Something happened. Some word, some conversation, some touch, some exchange, something seen and felt and known down deep. So deep, nothing could take it away, nothing could silence it, nothing could defeat it.

That's the root of Greenfield Hill Church. That's how you got here today. Because 2,000 years ago God's world took a sudden turn from life as we know it to life as it will be.

So, you want my television reviews of competing "Jesus" shows? "Killing Jesus" didn't last. "Finding Jesus," well, here we are. He's found. And we don't need the bones of St. James to believe it.

You are living proof.