

“Face Facts!” (Luke 24:1-12)

Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010

It is early Sunday morning, still dark. Mary Magdalene is on her way to complete Jesus' burial arrangements. As she walks along, we can well imagine what she is feeling: *Time to face facts, Mary. Jesus is dead – and so is everything He stood for. No doubt He meant well. No doubt He believed He was the Messiah. But if He had been, none of this would have happened, would it? The betrayal, the sham trial, the suffering, the cross. None of it would have happened. Yes, Jesus made a huge difference in your life – drew you out of darkness into the light. For that you can be forever grateful. But as for the rest? Face facts, Mary. Jesus is dead. His claims are dead. His promises are dead. That means your hopes are dead, too.*

Yes, we can well imagine the struggle Mary is feeling. For who of us hasn't also been forced to “face facts” somewhere along the way? This life is full of bitter disappointments. People proving untrustworthy. Plans falling apart. Undeserved hurts and hardships. And we can go on and on about how unfair this is, but still, life is what it is – and sometimes we do have to face facts.

That said, though, it's also worth remembering that things aren't always the way they seem – including “facts.” Something can be true, yet not be the whole truth and nothing but the truth. We all know how easy it is to jump to negative conclusions or assume we know more than we really do. Who of us hasn't done that? But a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing, so when we're forced to face facts we want to make sure they really *are* facts...and that we're facing *all* the facts.

This is the lesson Mary is about to learn as she draws near the tomb. Dawn is just beginning to break. There is enough light to see things that...well, that don't quite fit the facts she thinks she knows. For one thing, she sees that the Roman guards are gone. That's a fact! But what could have made them abandon their post? They could be executed for doing that! And the stone in front of the tomb – it's been rolled away! This, too, is a fact. But why? Who could have done this? Taking a deep breath, Mary and the others muster their courage and look inside the tomb. What do they see? Nothing! It's empty! The body is missing! Another fact. Yet, how can this be?! And now, suddenly, they hear the answer – the most amazing fact of all: **“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”** Terrified, the women bow to the ground. But this dazzling messenger is not through. He says: **“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.”** Yes... Yes! Now that they think about it, he's right. Jesus did say that. Early on. More than once. This, too, is a fact! But is it possible? Could Jesus be alive? Bursting with fear and excitement, some of the women go off to tell the disciples what has happened. Now it's time for *them* to face facts!

Well, we all know how events unfold from this point on – how the disciples, at first, are skeptical; then how Mary and Peter meet the risen Lord; then how Jesus appears to the other disciples – several times – and explains why this happened, what it all means. Soon enough, the disciples face facts, too. And as they do, what a difference it makes! For with all the facts in front of them – the truth, the whole

truth, and nothing but the truth – they realize what kind of a hope they now have. What kind of hope all Christians have. It's not one that's based on speculation or wishful thinking or abstract philosophy. To the contrary! This hope is based on something solid, something real, something historical: *Jesus' resurrection from the dead*. And that's good news – the best news there is – when you truly face facts.

For just to be clear, let's review the facts. Centuries before, Isaiah spelled out clearly what would happen to the promised Savior: He would be **“wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities,”** and would suffer the **“punishment that made us whole.”** On many occasions, Jesus told His disciples that this would happen to Him – that someday He would suffer, die, and rise again. They didn't want to hear this. Nor did they understand it. And they certainly they didn't connect it with Jesus' promise of salvation. But Jesus said it repeatedly. That's a fact. And at the Last Supper, Jesus took the message a step further. He told the disciples, **“Because I live, you will live also.”** This was no idle comment. In effect, it was a spiritual equation. *If I live* – after all I'm about to go through – that will prove that what I've promised is true; *you will live also* – you will live with Me forever in heaven.

Now, as Jesus said this, He knew that in a few hours the religious leaders would condemn Him as a false Messiah. This turned out to be fact. The religious leaders said He was not the Son of God; that He could not forgive or save anyone; that He was a liar and a blasphemer. What's more, Jesus knew they would not stop there. To prove Him false, they would have Him put to death. This also turned out to be fact. The very next day, Jesus was nailed to a cross, died an agonizing death, then was buried in a cold, dark tomb. Jesus knew His enemies would seal Him in, make sure His tomb was guarded. Jesus knew they'd try their hardest to make sure He stayed put. But Jesus told His disciples: *That won't work. Let them do their worst; God would raise Him again.* This also turned out to be fact. And why were all these facts so important? What did all these facts mean? Simple! They were proof that Jesus was telling the truth – especially the fact of Jesus' resurrection. By raising Jesus, God vindicated His claims: *This is My Son; He is the Messiah; He is the Savior of the world.* By raising Jesus, God also backed up His promises: *He can forgive your sins, and guarantee you eternal life; you can put your trust in Him.* God would not have raised Jesus to back up a lie! That is a fact! But God did raise Jesus! That is a fact! And essentially, the invitation of the Gospel, is to face this fact – face all these facts; face them, trust them, and follow wherever they lead.

Never mind the skeptics – those who say: *the dead don't rise, so Jesus didn't, either.* They have yet to explain all the unruly facts that don't fit their theory. Like who could have stolen the body from such a heavily guarded tomb. And what could have made the Roman guards abandon their posts, knowing they could be executed. And most of all, how to explain the astonishing change in the disciples. Before the resurrection, they were sniveling cowards, hiding away behind locked doors. After the resurrection, the disciples were bold and courageous – willing to do anything, suffer anything, to proclaim the Risen Lord. Why would they change like that? Why would they risk their lives like that – unless they had actually met Jesus alive and victorious over the grave? Objective scholars admit that there is more historical

basis for Jesus' resurrection than for many other historical "facts" we take for granted. The question is whether one will face these facts – all the facts – and follow wherever they lead. So never mind the skeptics. Instead, we want to ask: What does it *mean* to trust the facts of Easter? And where *do* they lead?

I'll give you one answer. Just a week ago, I was standing with one of our families at the grave of their beloved mother and grandmother. She had lived a good, long life – that's a fact. She had shared a lot of love during her life – also a fact. But what gave us hope standing at that grave was knowing *for a fact* that another grave was empty – Jesus' grave. What gave us assurance of her resurrection was the fact of another resurrection – Jesus' resurrection. And what allowed us to say, not goodbye but *Auf Wiedersehen* (until we meet again), was the fact that Jesus fulfilled His promise: **"Because I live, you will live also."** All her sins had been forgiven on the cross. Eternal life had been guaranteed on Easter morning. Jesus had promised, **"Whoever believes in Me, though they die, yet shall they live."** And she believed this promise. The family knew she believed this promise. That's how they could find comfort even as they mourned. They knew she was not so much gone as gone on. They knew they would see her again in an infinitely more beautiful life. They knew this because they were willing to face the facts of Easter – face them, trust them, and follow wherever they might lead.

And this is just one example. The truth is, facing the facts of Easter can lead to all kinds of discoveries – about God, about life, about our worth and purpose and destiny! These facts can inspire us each step of the way and give confidence even in the face of death – which, of course, is what God intends. That's why Jesus died for us. That's why Jesus rose for us. That's why Jesus did everything necessary to save us by grace alone. To free us for abundant lives here and eternal lives hereafter. These, too, are the facts of Easter. And what a difference it makes when we face these facts, trust these facts, and follow wherever they lead! Amen.