

## **“Living Proof”**

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*

*Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

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*I John 3:1-7, Luke 24:36b-48*

Our first passage comes from the first letter of John. In his commentary on John’s letters, Clifton Black writes, “These documents offer us, as it were, blurred snapshots of primitive Christian communities - congregations that grappled with some implications of their own religious tradition, appealing to doctrine, policy and authority that were all at an embryonic stage.”<sup>1</sup> As you listen to this passage, bear that in mind. You should also know that John is writing to a group of people who need to be assured of their identity as children of God. But at the same time he is writing to provide some challenge to them - to remind them that there are expectations for behavior that come with being children of God who abide in God’s love. This is why John speaks of sin. When he writes that “no one who abides in him sins”, he does not mean that any one of us is perfect. He is simply saying, I believe, that whenever and wherever and for however long at a time we are able to really stick with and abide in the love of God, we will do the just and loving thing - and we will see God at work. Listen now for the word of God in *I John 3:1-7*.

Our second passage comes near the end of the 24<sup>th</sup> and last chapter of Luke’s Gospel. That chapter begins, you may recall, with the women coming to the tomb and finding it empty. While they are there, two men in dazzling white appear to them and tell them that Jesus has been raised from the dead. Then, unlike in Mark’s account of Easter, the women in Luke do go to share this good news with the disciples, but the disciples dismiss their words as the ravings of hysterical women (though Peter does wind up going to the tomb to check it out). Later that same day, two disciples are walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus and talking about all that had happened, when the risen Jesus begins to walk with them, but they don’t recognize him. He begins to interpret scriptures to them, and when they invite him to have dinner with them he does. As he breaks the bread, their eyes are opened, and they recognize him (and just as they do, he disappears). So they run back to Jerusalem to share the news with the disciples. And that’s where our passage begins. Listen now for God’s word in *Luke 24:36-48*.

On the night before Easter, a woman named Susan Boyle (I trust you’ve heard of her?) took the stage to perform on a TV program called Britain’s Got Talent 2009. The audience wasn’t expecting much, as the cameras that panned the crowd showed. In fact, many in attendance giggled and smirked as Boyle shared with Simon Cowell and the other judges that it was her dream to be a professional singer. Having joined millions of others across the world in watching the video myself, I shared their initial skepticism.

After all, looking at Boyle before she started to sing, adjectives like these came to mind: frumpy, dowdy, goofy, awkward, and, I’m embarrassed to say, homely. Judging by outward appearance, Boyle does not possess the stunning physical beauty, the attractiveness of face and figure, we so often associate with those who make it big in the entertainment world. But boy can she sing. Like countless others who watched Boyle’s performance on *YouTube* or *The Today Show*, I listened, utterly rapt, as her pure, clear,

beautiful voice interpreted “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Miserables*. Together, we witnessed living proof that you cannot judge a book by its cover.

If the number of water cooler conversations, Google hits, Facebook posts, and TV interviews about her that have happened since that night is any indication, Susan Boyle is living proof of one thing more. When we see and hear for ourselves something that remarkable, something that moving, something that defies our expectations like her performance did - we can't help but tell the story.

Which brings us to today's gospel lesson. As the passage I read from Luke opens, the eleven disciples are experiencing something that runs counter to their expectations. Something more astounding than a plain looking forty-seven year old British woman being able to sing! Even though the travelers on the road to Emmaus have rushed back to tell them the story of their encounter with the risen Lord, even though they had heard Jesus say at least three times in the days before his crucifixion that he would rise from the dead, even though they are in fact seeing and hearing him, the startled eleven just can't believe their eyes and ears when Jesus appears to them. Scared half to death, they think he has to be a ghost. Even when Jesus is standing right there, in full view, in front of them, they need living proof that it really is him, in the flesh.

On this point, I think the gospel of Luke is so much more helpful, so much more true to human nature, than the gospel of John. In John, as you may remember from the scripture Dan read last week, Jesus also appears to the disciples in the upper room on the night of his resurrection. It all happens so quickly. Jesus appears, says peace be with you, shows them his hands and his side, they rejoice, and then he breathes his Spirit on them. There is no indication of the disciples initial reaction, no indication that they doubted whatsoever. In John, it is only Thomas, who was not there to see this, who gets singled out as a doubter. When he hears the disciples' report, he asserts, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, I will not believe.” In John, Thomas is the doubter.

In Luke's account, NONE of the disciples believe right off the bat. So Jesus addresses them all. Here is how Eugene Peterson renders what comes next, in modern language. *“Don't be upset, and don't let all these doubting questions take over. Look at my hands, look at my feet - it's really me. Touch me. Look me over from head to toe. A ghost doesn't have muscle and bone like this.” As he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. They still couldn't believe what they were seeing. It was too much. It seemed too good to be true.”*<sup>2</sup>

So Jesus has to do one thing more to give them the assurance they need. He asks them for a piece of leftover fish they had cooked, and he takes it and eats it right before their eyes. After providing them with this living proof, he opens their minds to understand the Hebrew scriptures, and how they point to Messiah who was to suffer, die, and rise again on the third day, and that repentance forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name throughout the world. Then he tells them that they are witnesses to these things. In other words, they have a story to tell.

Last Sunday during our time of celebrations and concerns, I asked you to pray for the family of Lukas Ledford, a three and a half month old baby boy from Trinity Presbyterian Church in Arlington,

where my wife, Judith, serves as an associate pastor. Lukas, by the way is German for Luke - his maternal grandmother is German and the family pronounced it the German way.

I need to tell you about how Lukas' family and his church have dealt with his death and how they are dealing with it, because for me, it has been living proof of the living power of the resurrection.

On the Thursday after Easter, Michael and Natascha got the call that no parent ever wants to receive. Their three and a half month old son, Lukas, was at daycare and he stopped breathing. The childcare provider did all she could. She performed CPR. Called 911. But when Lukas arrived at Arlington Hospital by ambulance he was already in a coma.

Lukas was transferred to Georgetown University Hospital. Right about that time, I happened to be heading over there to see Margaret Updike, when Judith called me with the news. She had been with Michael and Natascha at Arlington, but had told Natascha that she would stop and get a breast pump for her just in case Lukas came out of his coma. Would I mind checking in with them while I was there, just until Judith could get there? I told her I was glad to do that.

I found Michael and Natascha, stunned and red eyed in the waiting area. Michael filled me in. The doctor had told them the chances were high that the brain damage was too severe for Lukas to survive. I sat with them, and silently prayed that God might give me the words to say and keep me from saying words that would not be helpful. And often, that's the most important thing. Not saying the wrong thing. I mean what do you say? Then Michael said something like this to me, "Lukas is a gift to us from God. We know that whatever happens to him he is in God's hands and so are we. We are praying for a miracle, of course. But we know that God will give us the strength to deal with whatever happens."

There I was, the seasoned pastor, searching for the right words to say, and I found myself humbled by the faith expressed by a young father, who was able to look a horrible reality and express confidence and trust in God, no matter what. I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing and hearing. Not long after that, Judith arrived and was with the family for most of the rest of that evening and into the night.

That night two elders represented the Trinity congregation as the family and Judith baptized Lukas, which she would have done in just a few weeks on a Sunday morning. Michael and Natascha knew that Lukas was already a part of the family of Trinity and a part of God without the water and without the words, but they wanted to share that moment and say the words and celebrate that mark placed on him from the moment of his birth that said, "You are my beloved child forever and ever."

I want to share with you a portion of what Judith said to her congregation in her remarkable sermon last Sunday.

*We need to talk about these things as a community of faith today, because we have all suffered a loss in the death of this precious child of God who was one of us. But you may be thinking, "Pastor Judith, excuse me, but where's the resurrection in that story? Because if you are on all-church e-mail or if you have talked with other members of the community this weekend, you likely know that it was determined on Friday that Lukas had suffered a major stroke and could not recover. You likely know that the family was gathered and on Friday night they removed artificial life support. You likely wept when you heard the news that Lukas died early yesterday morning.*

*What you have not heard and what I have been a part of for the past three days, is the power of resurrection brought to bear in the midst of overwhelming, heart-wrenching tragedy. All through these days I have been in prayer with Michael and Natascha and their families and I have seen in everything they have said, in every decision they have made, in every prayer uttered, a faith that trusted God to know what was best for Lukas. At times it was absolutely palpable that Jesus himself had stepped into that room saying, "Peace be with you. And by the way, this is not a peace the world can give you. This is something more."*

*I can bear witness to the peace that passes all understanding today, because over the past few days I have seen a family torn apart and knit together again and again around singing and hugs and tears and especially prayer. There were prayers of concern for one another, prayers of love for Lukas, and amazingly, astoundingly, prayers of praise for God's love and mercy, prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of trust and hope and utter faithfulness, knowing that we were all held in the arms of God, who works in us for good no matter what.*

*Friends, that is the power of resurrection and it is absolutely precious in those darkest places where hope is all you have to hold on to. It is what Thomas was looking for when he said, "Let me touch and see and believe."<sup>3</sup>*

I think it is what we are *all* looking for, friends. And the amazing thing is that signs of it are all around us. In young parents who are able to trust that God will carry them through whatever tragedy they have to face. In people who give of their time to help at-risk children in the inner city or older adults in assisted living. In addicts who are in recovery. In the depressed and despairing who just keep slogging through putting one foot in front of the other until they come to a brighter day. In so many ways and in so many places, we can see the power of resurrection at work.

Here's how Judith ended her sermon last Sunday.

*Sometimes we all need a gospel presented to us with skin on. On Friday, Yvonne McIntire (an elder in the Trinity congregation) was that for me. I was at the hospital where I had been for most of two days. I was tired and struggling with my own emotions and the words I would need to say on Friday night when the family gathered. Yvonne had stopped to see them briefly and we passed in the hallway while I was going to the chaplain's office to borrow some anointing oil. She had already left the hospital when I caught her on the phone to say, "Where did you go? I wanted to talk with you."*

*She heard in my voice that I not only wanted to talk, I needed to talk. So she came back to the hospital and found me on the bench outside. She listened as I talked through my grief, my struggles. I asked her to pray for me, and she did. And suddenly there he was again, with the words I needed to hear, "Peace be with you. I will give you the words you need to say. Peace be with you."<sup>4</sup>*

This past Monday morning, Judith preached the most hope-filled, most resurrection-revealing, most powerful sermon for a memorial service she has ever preached. She talks about the experience of the past ten days as being transformative for her and for Trinity Presbyterian Church. She's got a story to tell.

We all have stories to tell about how the God we know in Jesus Christ is active in our lives - both within and beyond the walls of the church. They are stories that need to be told and stories that need to be heard.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> Clifton Black, "I, II, & III John" *The New Interpreter's Dictionary, Volume XII* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) p. 377.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible In Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1913.

<sup>3</sup> For the full text of Judith's sermon of April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009 and her memorial meditation for Lukas the next day, see Trinity Presbyterian's website <http://www.trinityarlington.org/new/sermons/Sermons.asp>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*