

Resurrection

John 20:17

Second Title: Is Anything Certain?

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Many of us here like uncertainty. Now I think many of us like to say, "Oh no, no the world is hungering for certainty and I am hungering for certainty." But loved ones, many of us actually prefer uncertainty. That's why a lot of us go to graduate school. Now a lot of us go to graduate school because we know why we're going but a lot of us go to graduate school because it puts off the terrible risk of committing ourselves to some enterprise whereby suddenly we would discover what we're worth and we would rather be a non-achiever than be a possible failure.

So we keep on putting off the evil day when we have to commit ourselves and that's really why we like uncertainty because uncertainty gives you an excuse for spinning your wheels, for marking time, for putting off committing yourself. And so we tend to want to hold on to uncertainty. I agree with you completely there is something in us human beings that wants certainty but I'd put it to you: there is something in us that likes uncertainty, because it enables us to excuse ourselves for not committing ourselves definitely and clearly to some enterprise.

I would just really push those of us who are older, and I'd say to you, isn't it true that we ourselves fiddled around for years and years before we committed ourselves to something? And we were all the time trying to avoid the horrible reality of what we were worth or what we weren't worth. That's why many of us get so wrapped up on Easter bunnies and that kind of stuff. I mean it is dumb all that stuff and I apologize, with apologies to all of you who are going off to lovely lunches today, that's why I think many of us try to get wrapped up in Easter lunches and picnics and all that kind of important stuff, because, in our hearts, we don't like the certainty that Easter brings.

Easter is the most certain day in the whole year. The first Easter Sunday was the clearest day that the world ever saw. You remember that song "on a clear day you can see forever". And I do a great imitation of Franky on that. But my wife said, "Promise you won't sing it." But on a clear day you can see forever and this is the clearest day of the whole year and the clearest day in the whole world. On this day you can see forever.

Suddenly all vagueness disappears on this day. And that hits many of us where it hurts. Because a lot of us here like to say, "Oh for goodness sake, there's no certainty anywhere. You can't find certainty. Let's face it. There's no one knows what is the meaning of the universe. Nobody really understands why we're here. No one understands where we all came from. Let's face it, we all just have to live the best way we can because we've had all kinds of holy men and the world is full of religions and they all have their own story. You can never know. You can never know for sure. All we can do is do our best." And there are many of us, loved ones, that love the uncertainty that comes from that kind of viewpoint.

On this day all that disappears, because millions may have followed Mohammad, millions may have followed Buddha. There may be thousands of other so-called religious leaders that have claimed to do mighty deeds and around which great legends have gathered, but this Easter day sets one person above

all of those.

Buddha didn't even believe in a personal God. Mohammad never claimed to be more than an ordinary human being. But there is only one man who not only claimed to be the unique son of our Creator, but who died so publicly that even Roman historians, critical of the faith that he established, recorded his death. And this same man, three days later, came back from being dead and for more than a month, walked and ate and slept with the material body among people who challenged their own contemporaries to disprove the resurrection of this man.

Only one man has set before the world such plain and obvious proof asking the world, Contradict this! Contradict it. Loved Ones, it's the last way you would try to pull a hoax on people, the way this man did it. He died so publicly and so obviously, He was so efficiently killed by the military experts at killing at that day, He so clearly presented Himself as one who was alive, and challenged so plainly anybody to disprove it, that, either this man is true, or history itself is not real.

Loved Ones, Easter sets this man above everybody else and if you say, "What is certainty?" I'll show you, it's in that verse that we read if you like to look at it. It's that John 20:17, that's the most certain verse in the whole world. John 20:17, "Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" A lot of other people have said that, but we have never seen them again. But he came back the next day to tell us what our Father was thinking of us.

Now, loved ones, that's certainty. No Mohammad, no Buddha, no fellow called Smith, no Zoroaster, no Moon can give that kind of certainty. That is certainty. And you and I really have to deal with that certainty today. I did not like it. I tried to deal with it the way probably many of you have. I tried to get rid of it because I was the same as many of you and the same as Aldous Huxley. I felt that I wanted to live life my own way and I didn't want to have to commit myself to some other person or to some definite way of life, I wanted to live it the way I wanted to live it. So I wanted to retain uncertainty as far as some final authority in the universe is concerned.

I was happy with the idea that we should all make our own standards, live by the golden rule, be as kind as we can to everybody. I was happy with that because that made me the god of my own life and I could decide how kind I was to be or how unkind I was going to be. But I hated the idea of somebody who was clearly and obviously the son of the Person who made my hands and my feet and therefore the one who had the right to have authority over my life.

So I tried to get rid of this certainty. I did it the way most of us do. You know how we tackle it. We say, "Okay, well that's history I see. Well, yeah yeah but it needn't have happen that way, need it?" Then you know the way we go on our high school games, we say, "Now, I know the evidence suggests that it did happen that way, but it could have happened some other way, couldn't it?" Then we scrounge around in the old wastebasket up here and we think, "Now what way could it have happened? Jesus could have been a green Leprechaun, that's a possibility."

It could have happened other ways and that's the way we tackle it, don't we? We say, "Now, maybe he wasn't resurrected from the dead. Maybe, maybe something else happened", and we get caught up in that kind of theorizing, don't we? We say, "Now, it could have happened some other way so perhaps it didn't happen that way", it's a ludicrous approach to history. It's absolutely ridiculous but we get involved in it because we have a volitional, a will-interest in disproving this. It would be mad if we were to do it with ordinary history. I'll try one on you.

Do you know how Carter got elected? Do you think it happened the way they said it happened? But don't you think that he could have bribed every elector by promising three pounds of peanuts for life? You know your reaction, you say, "Yeah, he could have done that but there's no evidence that suggests that he did. I haven't eaten a peanut for weeks." In other words, our response to that is, "Look, that's just imagination. It's not true. There's no evidence to suggest that that happened. Yes, it could have happened that way but there's no evidence to suggest it", but yet that's what we do with this resurrection business.

We tend to say, "Look, I know there's no evidence to suggest what I am going to suggest to you but it could have happened that way, couldn't it, and therefore maybe it didn't happen the way it's supposed to have happened." And that's what we do.

And I won't draw it out because a lot of us just know the thing off by heart. But you know there are two great facts on which the resurrection stands, the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances. Those are the twin bases of the resurrection. And so, we tackle the fact of the empty tomb. And we start with our crazy little imaginations and we say, "Now, it could have happened some other way: I know, they went on that first day of the week to the wrong tomb. That's it!" And we try that for a while and then realize it was a private cemetery and there was only one tomb and, anyway, if they had gone to the wrong tomb, the authorities could have come and gone to the right tomb. So we try that.

Then, you know and it's almost, I mean you have to call it high school because it is almost high school, and yet you know loved ones, how often we've listened to this stuff and shared it ourselves. I know: the Roman authorities or the Jewish authorities or anybody -- we almost get that point -- but the Roman authorities or the Jewish authorities stole the body. That's it! And then suddenly you begin to wonder, "Well if they stole the body, and they had the body, and they were so anxious to destroy the Christian sect, why didn't they just bring the body out and parade it through the streets of Jerusalem, and say, "Look, these people are saying this man rose from the dead. Here's his body. He didn't rise from the dead. Here's his body! You can see that." And that's true, isn't it? If they stole the body, whether it be the Romans or the Jews, all they had to do was produce the body, and that was the Christian sect destroyed; they were exposed as liars.

And then we say, "Well, maybe not. Maybe they didn't steal the body. I know, the disciples stole the body. They stole the body. The disciples!" And yet, loved ones, you know there's an ethical problem in that when you begin to think about it. Can you imagine having your children at home, and knowing that this man Jesus didn't rise from the dead, knowing that he is an ordinary man, that he claimed to be the Son of God but that he's just an ordinary man, and he didn't rise from the dead at all, but you go and you steal the body and you hide it somewhere, and then you come out and you preach that he rose from the dead? And that's the very reason for the persecution that comes upon you. And yet you keep on preaching this lie, even when you end up going into a lion arena with your children by the hand. And even as you see one of those lions eating up one of your children and you know that they're dying for a lie, and yet you still keep pretending that this man rose from the dead. No man, no woman, however insane they are, will go that far!

They may die for something that they think is true. But they will not die for something that they know is not true. None of us will die for a lie. And yet, loved ones, these disciples and their followers and their friends died in thousands. The Roman emperor used them as torches, put tar over them and lit them, and used them as torches in his garden parties. He tore through them by the

thousands. And yet these so-called Christians kept on claiming that this man really did rise from the dead. Loved ones, if they knew that was a lie, even if the first ones, the Peters and the Johns knew it was a lie, they would not die for it. They'd have pulled off the hoax when it began to cost them their lives and the lives of their families.

And then, some of us try the other one. "Well, do you really think that Jesus died? Do you not think that he maybe swooned, or fainted from his wounds?" And, you know it sounds plausible, until you see and study the narratives of what he did immediately after his resurrection. And then it becomes ridiculous because you're forced to believe, first of all, that the Roman soldiers, who were experts in killing, did such a poor job that Jesus was still alive on the Cross. That they thought he was dead, and therefore did not break his legs, because that's what happens. When they weren't sure a person was dead, they would break his legs. They didn't break Jesus' legs because they thrust a spear into his side and blood and water came out, and they were absolutely sure he was dead. But you have to believe first of all that they did such a poor job that He was still alive when he was taken from the Cross, and put into the tomb and bound tightly with those cloths that are talked about in that chapter that we read.

Then, that he lay there in the coldness of the tomb, bleeding all the time. And then that he recovered sufficiently to do, really what is a Houdini, to get himself out of those bonds that were binding him so tightly and then was strong enough, losing all that blood all the time, strong enough to get up and push the stone away that it took two men to remove. And then, that he appeared in the garden. And then disappeared immediately and travelled miles at supersonic speed to get to another place to appear in another room to pass through walls and through locked doors and present himself alive again. And then over the next 40 days, make 14 different appearances in different geographical spots.

Loved ones, he gave an impression of being more alive than he had ever been in his life before. It's incredible to believe that a man who was dying from his wounds could bring about that kind of physical transformation. And yet that's what you have to believe if you'll believe the swoon theory. And it's the same, loved ones, with the old hallucinations. Because many of us have tried to tackle, "All right, we can't deal with the empty tomb, you can't undermine that fact, we can undermine the appearances, the resurrection appearances." He appeared on 13 or 14 different occasions. "Hallucinations. Hallucinations."

But any psychologist here knows that the appearances don't fit any of the laws that govern hallucinations. There are definite psychological laws. One is, a hallucination is usually subjective. It's usually something that you experience just yourself. It's you alone that sees it. Jesus appeared to 70 people in the upper room, to above 500 people at one time. He was seen constantly by groups of people. A hallucination has to be an individual thing. It has to be something that occurs to an individual, not to a group.

A hallucination has to be something that you want to see. You know it's a dear mother whose son has been killed in Vietnam and she desperately wants him back and she wants him back and she sits there at the door of the kitchen and she sees him coming through the door because she wants that. These disciples had given up hope. They said, "We thought this man was the man who was to lead Israel but he is now dead." Repeatedly you find them imprisoned in an upper room because they're scared and afraid and they feel, "No, he wasn't really the Son of God. He is finished and done with."

They had given up any hope of seeing Jesus so that when he appeared to them and on the road to

Emmaus or appeared to Mary in the garden, they thought he was somebody else. They had given up hope that they would see him. A hallucination has to appear over a long period of time, years and years and years. Here, Jesus appeared over a period of 40 days and then the appearances stopped. Hallucinations usually take place with people that are nervous and imaginative, not people like Peter and the down to earth fishermen who were very practical men.

Loved ones, I don't know if you've tried those arguments out, but I tried them. And I tried somehow to persuade myself that this resurrection had not really taken place and that this Jesus was no different from any other religious leader. But loved ones, the more you try to offer arguments to explain the resurrection, the harder it gets to believe the arguments themselves and the easier it becomes to believe the resurrection. Of course loved ones, the truth is that's a ridiculously unhistorical approach to take to history. You don't confirm history or disprove history by saying it couldn't have happened because I can think in my little head of some other way that it could have happened.

You examine the evidence. And when you examine the evidence for the resurrection, it is beyond the evidence of any other historical event. Westcott said, "It's the best attested fact in history, the resurrection of Jesus." And it is, loved ones. The witnesses are the most reliable witnesses that we have ever had to examine. They have made an impression of honesty and sanity in our world. Wherever you get true Christianity, you get an influence for health and sanity in our society that has come from the Peters and the Johns and the Simon Peters and the James. These men were the most reliable people that we have met in our history. They were people who died for what they witness to.

And they witness to it. You remember John said, "What we have felt and seen, what we've touched with our hands, this is what we tell you. We have seen this man. We have walked with him and eaten with him. We know him. We have talked with him. We saw him healing the lepers." And if you doubt, if you wonder, "Well, can you prove that they were eyewitnesses?" Sure! The literature of the first century is filled with their letters. Letters from this man to this group, from this group to this group. Even the Roman historians, even people like Tacitus and Teutonium, even critical historians like Pliny and Celsus and Porphyry refer to these men as being alive at this time, and to this man Jesus being alive and being crucified at that time.

So, not only are there reliable eyewitnesses, but their eyewitness account is corroborated by the contemporary historians of their time. Not only that, of course, but they wrote the account at a time when other people were alive who had seen these events. I don't know if you have examined carefully Islam or Buddhism, but you'll find that all the other religions are based on so-called facts that were only recognized two or three hundred or 400 years after the person actually lived. So they discovered all kinds of miracles a hundred years after Mohammad lived, after Buddha lived and most of the other religions are built on that kind of legend that is built up years after the events took place.

These men wrote about Jesus' resurrection as early as 48 A.D. -- that's the book of Galatians. It was circulating round the ancient world in the year of 48 A.D. Now, do you see what that means? If you had a 30-year-old alive in 30 A.D. who had observed the resurrection, that 30-year-old was only 48 when the letter to the Galatians was circulating. All they had to do was say, "I saw it. It did not happen that way."

There were thousands of people who were still alive when the New Testament was circulating and all they had to do was say, "No, it didn't happen that way. That man really died and he never rose from

the dead." Loved ones, whenever you begin to examine the history of the resurrection, you come up against history that is better than anything else we have. Even if you tackle it along the line of "Well, who knows if this is what they really wrote? After all, it was 1900 years ago. Maybe it's all been changed."

Loved ones, you know that what you depend on is the manuscripts, the manuscripts. And old Caesar's "Gallic Wars" written in 50 B.C. -- 10 manuscripts we have. Some boy could have gone round and changed the ten manuscripts. We don't really know if Caesar wrote what we say he wrote. There were only 10 manuscripts and those are ancient. It was written in 50 B.C.. The earliest one is 900 A.D.. Some fellow could have re-written the thing 5 or 6 or 7 times. In the New Testament, there are 4000 Greek manuscripts behind the New Testament. The earliest one is 130 A.D.

130 A.D., there's a manuscript in the Manchester Museum of part of John's Gospel. Do you see how impossible it would be for some happy little forger to tour around all the caves of Qumran and all the deserts and not only that but he'd have to do it over a period of a thousand years because these 4000 manuscripts are dated from 130 to 1000 A.D. He'd have to have a whole family. He'd have to get his sons to promise to get their sons to send their son around and change all the manuscripts. It's impossible. You couldn't do it.

Loved ones, really when you deal with the resurrection, it's the best attested fact in the history and that's why I say to you, "This is the most certain day in the whole world's life and this man Jesus is really the Son of your Maker. He really is. He is the Son of your Maker and if you try to get around it, you're just rejecting reality. And God, your God, on the final day will say, "No, no. Don't come that story with me that you haven't enough evidence. Don't come that story with me that there were so many religious leaders and so many great religions that you couldn't tell which was true. My Son's death and resurrection was clearly different from all of the others. And my Son was obviously my Son. And don't tell me that I didn't give you enough evidence. I gave you a black-and-white evidence scattered throughout the world. I gave you a living church that has never failed to celebrate his last supper one evening since it was first celebrated by him. Don't come and tell me that I didn't give you any certainty or any information."

Loved ones, truly, I'm thinking of those of you who are sitting here today and saying, "Well, it's good but it's not good enough." Loved ones, honestly, your God, your God will call you bluff, He will. On the final day, He will say, "Look, you just didn't want to commit yourself to my Son. That was it. You just wanted to be your own God in your own life."

Some of you may say, "Well, you mean that Jesus is alive today?" Loved ones, of course, sure! If he destroyed death once, he can destroy it all the time. Sure he is alive. He is alive here in this room. In this room he is alive. If you say to me, "Well, how do you know and I don't know?" Loved ones, it's really very simple, the answer to that, how Jesus makes himself real to you. Judas -- not Iscariot -- but Judas, one of the other disciples, said that to Jesus, "Lord, how is it that You'll manifest Yourself to us and not to the rest of the world?"

You might like to look at the answer, loved ones, it's John 14:22, "Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord how is it that you will manifest yourself to us and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.'"

I think some of you who even claim to be Christians do not sense the reality of Jesus alive in your own spirits and your own hearts. And I think many of you wonder why is that so? How is it that Jesus is not making Himself real to me? I think a lot of us, loved ones, get caught up in little techniques. Well if you say the Lord's prayer holding your mouth this way, Jesus will show himself to you. Or if you speak in tongues, Jesus will show Himself to you. Or if you have some shattering emotional experience, He'll show himself to you. Or if you're imaginative and kind of liberal arts enthusiast and very emotional, Jesus will show himself to you. Loved ones, it's so good that Jesus gives such a clear answer.

"If a man loves me, he will keep my words and my Father will love him and we will make our home in his heart." That's it. If you'll clean up your life, God by his Spirit, will make his Son real to you. That's it. If you say you love Jesus because he died for you and because he is the son of your Maker, then you'll keep his words. That's what Jesus said. "If you love me, don't talk a lot about it, don't express it, don't keep saying 'Praise the Lord' and 'Amen' and 'Hallelujah'. If you love me, you'll keep my words. You'll be honest with your income tax results. You won't be angry with your brother, because whosoever is angry with his brother is guilty of the judgment. You will not look on a woman to lust after in your heart, "Because I say to you that they said, 'Behold, whoever commits adultery is guilty of the judgment.' But I say to you if you look on to a woman to lust after her in your heart, you're guilty of the judgment."

In other words, you'll obey Jesus' words. You know that's the final proof. You know it. You brothers, who are down to earth practical men and you sisters who are subtle and shrewd, if I say that I am the son of your Maker, the Creator of the world, you know you'll have one attitude to me, if only to get in good with the one in authority. You'll say, "What does your Father want me to do with my life? How do you want me to live? What am I doing that you don't like?" Loved ones, that's it.

Jesus said if a man loves me, he will keep my words and my Father will come to him and make my home in his heart. It's not a spooky spiritual experience. It's not some thrilling, exciting high that you bring on with drugs. It's not some emotional kind of trip. It's a down to earth thing. If you believe that Jesus is the Creator of the world, make your life what he says it should be. Clean your life up, stop sinning, obey him.

If you say to me, "Oh now, listen. Will that do it?" That'll do it. There'll be a strange new spirit will come into your life and you'll begin to feel at one with your Creator and you'll begin to feel that Jesus is real to you. That's it, loved ones. That's it. That's to those of us who aren't Christians here and to those of us who are Christians and have lost the sense of Jesus' presence, loved ones, it's the same story.

"Lord, how is it that you'll manifest yourself to us and not to the rest of the world?"

"If a man loves me, he will keep my words and my Father will love him and we will make our home in his heart."

That's it. So it's so beautiful. It's so simple. And that will work, loved ones. It truly will.

So in a few minutes now, would you examine any place in your life where you're not obeying what Jesus said? That's what's keeping him making himself real to you.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we would pray now for each other for Judgment Day honesty. Lord Jesus, it does seem plain from simple intellectual examination of the facts of history that you are alive and that you are actually the Son of our Maker. Lord Jesus, many of us have no awareness of you, no sense of your reality and so we're missing a whole world that is obviously there that we can't touch at all. Lord, we want to touch that. So will you show us where we're not keeping Your words in our life?

Will You show us Lord, where we're all talk about loving you but no action? Lord, if we've reneged on our finances in some way by that old half honesty in business that shows that we're just trusting ourselves to manipulate our way through, Lord will you convict us now of that? And Lord, we'll put that right even if it means sending in a new report, we'll put that right. If it means giving some money back to somebody, we'll put that right, Lord.

We never saw before that your presence depends on our obedience. Lord, we always thought it was something to do with our imaginations or emotions, but we'll put those things right.

Lord, if we're indulging in something that we've known for years is wrong, we'll stop that now. We're tired of the unreality and the hypocrisy in our lives and Lord we commit ourselves to putting these things right now, because this is such a clear day that we can see forever right down to our life's end to looking into your eyes and confronting you with the broken bits of our lives in our hands and trying to make excuses. Lord, that's too clear of You, we're going to act on the clearer view that we have and we're going to put things right this very moment.

Lord, will you take care of manifesting yourself to us? We're not going to be all preoccupied with trying to feel you. Lord, you have said you'd take care of that. Your Father would make his home in our hearts if we keep your words. So we commit ourselves to that now for your glory.

And thank you Lord that this can be the most beautiful Easter Sunday that we have ever had in our whole life, so great that it lasts throughout every day and every night of our lives to that final morning when the breath goes from us and we meet you, the Lord of eternal morning, and are welcomed to your dear home. Thank You Lord.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and until we see Jesus face-to-face. Amen.