FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"FROM LOCKED DOORS TO LIVING WITNESSES"

Scripture Lesson: Jonah 1: 1-17; John 20: 1-31

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, April 5, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Johnah 1:1-17

Jonah Tries to Run Away from God

1 *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying,* 2 *"Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me."* 3 *But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.*
4 *But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.* 5 *Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.* 6 *The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."*
7 *The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.* 8 *Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"* 9 *"I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."* 10 *Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.*
11 *Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.* 12 *He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you."* 13 *Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.* 14 *Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you."* 15 *So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.* 16 *Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.*
17 *But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

John 20: 1-31

The Resurrection of Jesus

1 *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.* 2 *So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one*

whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 *Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.* 4 *The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.* 5 *He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.* 6 *Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,* 7 *and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.* 8 *Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed,* 9 *for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.* 10 *Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

11 *But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb,* 12 *and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.* 13 *They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."* 14 *When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.* 15 *Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."* 16 *Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).* 17 *Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"* 18 *Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

19 *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."* 20 *After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* 21 *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* 22 *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.* 23 *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

Jesus and Thomas

24 *But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.* 25 *So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

26 *A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."* 27 *Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."* 28 *Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"* 29 *Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

The Purpose of This Book

30 *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book.* 31 *But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

From Locked Doors to Living Witnesses

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Not surprisingly, there are many people in the world today who do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. For some, it's simply a beautiful story, while for others, it's wishful thinking. Still, others dismiss the resurrection altogether, they consider it foolishness. The Apostle Paul affirmed this when he talked about how the message of the cross — and by extension, the resurrection — is indeed "foolishness to those who are perishing."

Of course, it is not only those outside the faith who are skeptical about such things. It happens to people inside the church as well. Sure, there are times when we are bold and courageous like Thomas, who at one time declared: "Let us also go, that we may die with [Jesus]." But at other times, we resemble the version of Thomas that we read about this morning who essentially says, "Unless I see, and unless I touch, I will not believe." It just goes to show that there is a tension that can reside even in the life of a believer — a reverent push and pull between confidence and doubt, courage and fear. And in few places in the Bible is that tension more evident than in the passage before us this morning.

John tells us: "The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19) Locked doors. That seems like a small detail, but it speaks volumes. Because the disciples are afraid, and they are hiding. But they don't stay that way!

This morning, we are going to consider how God turns those petrified disciples into living witnesses. And to help us understand that transformation, we begin, not in Jerusalem but with Jonah.

Not surprisingly, there are many people who question whether Jonah's story is true. Some see it as parable, or a legend, or maybe a vivid tale meant to make a point. And, here again, such skepticism is not limited to outsiders. Even in the Church — even among pastors — Jonah is sometimes viewed that way. But that's not how Jesus viewed it. In the Gospels, Jesus treats Jonah not as fiction, but as fact. Jesus uses it to foreshadow his death and resurrection. Jesus put it like this, "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

It is easy to understand why some people would stumble over the story of Jonah and making that connection because it is miraculous. But I want to pause for a moment because, at a basic level, I want us to remember something very important.

The question is not whether something is plausible, but whether we will trust that what God has revealed to us in the Scriptures is true.

So, what has God told us about Jonah? Well, right away we know that Jonah is a prophet to whom God speaks directly. That too is an important detail because we are sometimes inclined to say, "If God would just speak to me personally, then I would follow." Maybe we shouldn't be so sure about that; after all, Jonah didn't!

Jonah, boards a ship to Tarshish, fleeing the call of God. And then the storm comes. It is so fierce that even seasoned sailors are afraid. They cast lots to see who is to blame, and the lot falls on Jonah, and he owns up to it, and then, at his own urging, they throw him into the sea, and immediately the storm stops. Isn't it interesting that the wind and the waves obey God more quickly than a prophet does. And then comes the great fish and for three days and three nights, Jonah is held in a kind of living tomb.

But we come to learn that the belly of the fish is both a place of judgment and of mercy and for our purposes this morning, we would do well to remember that from Jonah's death-like confinement — God delivers him.

Speaking of confinement, in John 20, we find the disciples right where fear would drive most anyone into hiding. Jesus is dead, and their hopes and dreams are shattered! But then, something extraordinary happens. John writes: "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" We notice that Jesus doesn't knock, he doesn't wait for the door to be opened. The door is still locked but Jesus is suddenly there.

This helps us to understand that for Christ to be risen, it is not at all dependent upon the disciple's courage or lack thereof. In fact, Jesus comes into the midst of their fear and doubt! And his first words are not rebuke or explanation — he speaks of "peace."

As in Jonah's day, and when God would commanded the storm — and as Jesus had done before as he had calmed the sea — here in a room he now stands, and with all authority in heaven and on earth and he speaks peace, not to the sea, but to the human heart.

Then he shows them his hands and his side. His wounds are still visible, and the scars remain which tells us that Jesus' death was real.

The Romans, they knew exactly how to carry out an execution, and they ensured that Jesus was dead. And after they pierced his side, his body was taken down. I say all this to emphasize that the crucifixion was not symbolic. It was public event. Our confessional standards don't want us to forget that the Apostle's Creed says that Jesus was crucified and dead and buried. Why speak of Jesus' death in three different ways? Because we cannot forget that Jesus really died!

We cannot forget that Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body, and with Nicodemus by his side, helped to lay Jesus in a garden tomb. Friends, there is no confusion doubt that Jesus was dead.

Now, it is tempting for us to spend our time talking about the empty tomb, because that is also part of the historical record, but that isn't the only evidence upon which the resurrection hinges. In fact, what really anchors the Church's historic witness is this: that the risen Christ was seen, truly seen, in bodily form.

The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15, that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, to the disciples, to Thomas, to more than five hundred people at one time, and "last of all," Paul says, "as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." Now, those are not abstractions — they are testimonies! They are men and women, who were previously disillusioned with fear, who were now looking at Jesus face to face. They spoke with him, touched him, and ate with him.

Throughout the recent Lenten season, we witnessed the power of testimony. The man born blind, who could not explain much of anything, he could at least say, "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." Or consider the woman at the well. After she encountered Jesus, she went back to her town and told her neighbors, "[Jesus] told me everything I have ever done." That testimony, by God's grace, was also transformative!

During Lent, we considered how grace sustains us, and frees us and how it exposes us, and seeks us, and carries us home — and now, at Easter, we see the foundation beneath it all — a grace that conquers even death.

Now, all that said, for me, perhaps the most compelling evidence for the resurrection isn't just what was seen by so many witnesses, but what happened next.

Those disciples, who were hidden behind locked doors and who were afraid and confused, within mere weeks, those same disciples are in the streets of Jerusalem proclaiming boldly that: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses." Peter, who had denied Jesus three times, he now preaches without restraint.

And the others? Though time does not permit us to go into their individual biographies, they would each come to know — in some form or fashion — imprisonment or persecution, even death! And here's the simple truth: people don't stake their lives on what they know to be false! What happened — what changed everything — is that someone they had seen die, they had now seen alive, and that encounter completely changed the trajectory of their life.

So, what does this mean for us? Or better yet, as frail and as fallen as we are, on what basis do we stand before God? It's certainly not because of anything we've done.

The Scottish pastor Alistair Begg tells a story that captures our situation better than almost anything else I have heard.

He imagines the thief on the cross, the one crucified next to Jesus, having made it to heaven and being checked in, and the angel asks him: "What are you doing here?" And the thief on the cross says, "I don't know." "What do you mean you don't know?" "I mean, I don't know."

A supervisor angel is called in — "ok, let's see, are you clear on the doctrine of justification by faith?" "I've never heard of it." "Well then, what about the authority of Scripture?" "I don't know what you're talking about." Finally, in frustration, the angel asks, "Then on what basis are you here?" And the man answers: "The man on the middle cross said I can come."

And that's it. That is the only answer — it's not because we did this or that. No! The only reason we are here is because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross!

It's not just that Jesus came back to life — it is that in Jesus' resurrection, God has declared Jesus' atoning work on the cross complete. God has declared that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, death — which is the just wage for our sins — Jesus paid that debt in full and death has been defeated. True and abiding reconciliation with God is now possible!

After the Risen Christ came to his disciples, their lives are transformed, and they end up leaving that room and proclaiming to the loving claims of the Gospel, beginning in Jerusalem and to all the ends of the earth, until, at last, it has reached us.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not true because we believe it. It is true, because it is true; and for those of us who have received this truth by grace and through faith, our mandate is no less clear than it was for the disciples and this good news has been given to us so that we too may trust it, and live in it, and be changed by it.

And for those who are unsure, for those who stand, like Thomas, somewhere between doubt and faith — know this: the risen Jesus still comes, He still speaks peace, He still makes himself known. The doors of life and life abundant are open to us, not because we forced them open, or in any way have we proved ourselves worthy. Now ours are the blessings of heaven because Jesus is worthy!

Jesus is the only one capable of bypassing the locked doors of life; indeed, there is no obstacle of ours that Jesus cannot overcome including our doubt because, in the end, Jesus remains the very source and hope of the church's affirmation in every time and in every place — that Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.