

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
Easter 2018

Be a Part of the Story

1. **It is too late! The story ended long ago.**
2. **It is too late! The story ended for me long ago.**
3. **It is too late! I have nothing to add to the story.**

1 Corinthians 15:9-11

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

“It is just a story.” There are many people who feel that way about Easter. It is just a story, as impossible as the Easter bunny. It is impossible for anyone to rise from the dead. The violence and chaos in the world is enough to convince a person that there is no God at all. Easter is just a story.

Some of you here today may feel that way. You might be here to show love and respect to your family or friends. You might be here because you are uncertain and are looking for answers. Whatever the reason, I just want to let you know that we are glad you are here. We welcome your doubts and questions, because you are not alone.

Some of us here believe Easter is more than just a story, but we have to admit our doubts. The Easter story doesn't seem to be making much difference in our lives. We still face life from the doom and gloom of Good Friday. Maybe we have no part in the Easter story.

Still others of us are absolutely convinced that Jesus rose from the dead. But to those who watch us, it seems that it must be just a story. They don't see a dramatic change in us. We eat too much, we drink too much, we curse too much, we get angry, we worry, we hold grudges, we are bitter and complain all the time. People know that we claim Easter is real, but our unchanged lives proclaim to those around us: It is just a story.

I believe every one of us here today has a reason to ask, Is Easter more than just a story? How can I know that it is true?

1. **It is too late. The story ended long ago.**

Since we can't be witnesses ourselves, can we ever be sure it happened? Is it too late because the story ended long ago?

But let me ask you a question. How many of you believe that Donald Trump is the President of the United States? Most of the commentators on election night said that was not possible. Maybe it is not true. After all, I wasn't a witness at all the voting places around the country. I wasn't present when they tabulated the votes. I wasn't present when he was sworn into office.

Maybe it is just a big conspiracy. Maybe he really isn't the President!

We weren't witnesses to any of these events, but we have no doubt they happened because so many reliable witnesses have told us, whether you want to believe it or not, these are the results of the election and he was sworn in.

My point is this: We do not personally witness many, many events of which we are absolutely certain. If there are enough reliable witnesses, we don't question it.

Is Easter just a story someone made up?

When you listen to the witnesses, it is unlikely they would have made up a story like this. They would have ended the story on Good Friday.

On Friday evening Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. The women watched from a distance. Everyone thought the story was over.

What the witnesses didn't know was that this was just the end of Act 1 of the story.

In a play, the first act traditionally ends with a crisis for which there seems to be no solution. Then there is an intermission, and the resolution comes in Act 2.

On Friday evening, all day on Saturday, and on Sunday morning, the first witnesses thought that the story was ended. They didn't realize that it was just the intermission. They were surprised when Act 2 began on Easter morning!

The women went out to the tomb to anoint Jesus' dead body. When they came back with the news, "We've seen angels who said that Jesus had risen," the disciples didn't believe it (Luke 24:9-11). They weren't making plans to devise some cleverly invented story. All the written witnesses tell us that the first witnesses needed to be convinced that the story was just beginning the second act!

So Jesus gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive (Acts 1:3). The Gospel accounts tell us about the women who saw Jesus, how he appeared to the apostles over and over, how he ate with them and invited them to touch his hands and side, to stop doubting and believe (Luke 24:36-43).

In fact, Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke, wasn't an eyewitness either. But at the beginning of his book, he explains how he carefully investigated everything from the beginning so that he could reassure a man named Theophilus that Easter was more than just a story.

Twenty five years after Jesus' resurrection, hundreds of miles away in the Greek city of Corinth, Christians were questioning if it were possible that the dead rise. So in 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul lists a large number of witnesses.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas [that is, Peter], and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

What is that last reference? Paul himself was a witness. But he uses a derogatory term about himself because of his previous life. He goes on: “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

Amazing! Not only are there all these witnesses to the resurrection, but even a hostile witness. In the GroupWork/Going Deeper exercise I encourage you to read Paul’s testimony before the Roman Governor Festus in Acts 26. Paul is in chains, risking his life, and he testifies to the impossible: Jesus is alive! Good Friday was just the end of Act 1. Act 2 began on Easter morning.

I love Paul’s testimony because it also answers my second fear:

2. It is too late! The story ended for me long ago!

What if it really is true that Jesus rose from the dead? That can just make Easter another frightening day. If it is true that Jesus rose from the dead, then it is also true that he is going to come and be my judge.

I’m guessing that all of us here have things we have done in our past that haunt us. King David’s prayer in Psalm 25 is my constant prayer, “Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.” Maybe it is too late for you because of sins of the past that haunt your conscience. Maybe it was the sins of last night! It is too late to celebrate Easter, because you feel, “The story ended for me long ago.”

Listen as Paul goes on: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.”

The good news I want each one of us to claim this morning is that it is never too late. Only our Act 1 is over. Our Act 2 begins “today.”

Every day is that “today.” Every day we can claim the grace of God. What does that mean? Consider Romans 4:25. Paul wrote: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” Jesus died for our sins on Good Friday. His resurrection is God’s announcement that his sacrifice was sufficient payment. We are justified. God sits as our judge and says, “You are not guilty.”

Every day that we wake up and know that Jesus rose from the dead, it is the beginning of our Act 2. We don’t have to look back at the past as a burden that makes us unworthy. It is forgiven. We begin the day as God’s forgiven, dearly loved child. It is a new life. That is the significance of the resurrection for us.

3. It is too late! I have nothing to add to the story.

And that news changes our approach to life. It did for the Apostle Paul. He wrote:

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed” (1 Corinthians 15:10-11).

Paul could have said, **“It is too late! I have nothing to add to the story.”**

But after he knew for certain that Jesus had risen from the dead, he was committed to sharing that grace of God with others. “I worked harder than all of them.”

This is the amazing thing! When a person admits the sins of “Act 1” of their lives and claims each day as the beginning of “Act 2,” a life of service to my risen Savior, there is an incredible commitment. I’ve seen it over and over again in some of you who weren’t sure of Christ’s forgiveness. When that forgiveness became certain for you, suddenly you put me to shame as I see your dedication and devotion to Christ.

So perhaps you feel there is nothing you can add to the Resurrection story. Maybe you feel you have squandered years of your life and it is too late. Or perhaps you don’t have the strength and energy of former years.

But everything that happened in Jesus’ life... his Act 1 of suffering and his Act 2 as the risen Son of God sitting at the right hand of God... all this was written in God’s book beforehand. It all happened “according to the Scriptures.” And the Act 2 of your story is written in God’s book as well. God promises that “all the days ordained for us were written in his book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139). God promises that we are “God’s masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus, to do good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

It is never “too late” to add to Jesus’ story. God has shown you grace... undeserved love... so that his grace can flow through you to others.

In the coming month we are going to see how the Act 2 part of the apostles’ lives played out. Below you will see the outline for our message series. I invite you to come back and let’s find our part in Act 2 together.

Act 2 – Be a Part of the Story

April 8 – Commissioned – Acts 1:1-11

April 15 – Empowered – Acts 2:1-47

April 22 – Persecuted – Acts 7:1-8:8

April 29 – Prepared – Acts 9:1-20

May 6 – Uniting – Acts 10:1-11:18

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My Next Steps to Join the Story in Act 2!

Carefully examine the witnesses: Read the Gospel according Luke this week. Luke wasn't an eyewitness either, so he did the research so that "you may know with certainty the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). Stop by the Welcome Center to receive a Bible as our gift to you.

Know you are part of the Story: Daily read this passage until you know it by heart: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15).

Understand your part in the Story: A Bible study called *Following the Promise* will help you follow the promise of the Savior from the Garden of Eden to your own life. Check the Connection Card for more information. This study prepares you to become a member/partner of St. Paul's and The Bridge.

GroupWork for Small Groups or Personal/Family Study

1. Was there a moment in the Easter service that you found especially moving? Share your experience with the group.
2. "It is just a story." What makes the Easter story so hard to believe?
3. Read Acts 26:1-29.
 - a. How does Paul's background make him a compelling witness to Jesus' resurrection?
 - b. Paul makes his testimony in chains before the Roman governor. How does this make his witness to Jesus' resurrection even more compelling?
 - c. How might you use this to help someone who doubts the Christian message?
4. Read 1 Corinthians 15:9-11. Paul admitted he didn't deserve to be a witness to Jesus' resurrection. Describe the impact of grace on Paul's life and your own.
5. What is the key lesson you learned from the message and your reading this week? With whom will you share this news this week?
6. Break into groups of two or three to share prayer requests and pray together.

