

February 21, 2016    “From The Very First”    Luke 23:23-31

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the very first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

This is the second Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is the period from Ash Wednesday to the evening before Easter morning. By definition it is a period with 40 weekdays. It does not include Good Friday or the period of 3 days during which Jesus was entombed. Before the Reformation this season was dedicated to fasting. Following the Reformation and the emphasis in Protestant theology of salvation through faith in Jesus and the grace of God, it became a season in which Bible Study and worship would focus on the cross and the crucifixion of Jesus.

The reading this morning begins that part of the Gospel story. There are a couple of things I want to say as we begin this part of the Lenten Journey. It is a thoroughly modern development to pretend that there might be a story, a true story, behind what the Gospels tell us about Jesus death and resurrection. As I said recently at the study event we held on the matter of the Body, Mind and Spirit Paper produced by and in the name of The Presbyterian Church In Canada, The Bible in general, and the Gospels in particular do not need to be defended by people like me. They are God;s word. They present God's truth in written form. The Spirit of God urges us to understand them. To believe them. To let the words in the hands of

the Spirit of God shape us and mold us to the service of Almighty God.

The phrase “from the very first” is from the opening verses of Luke's Gospel. He uses that phrase to make plain to us, that in his time, whether it was 2 years following the resurrection of Jesus or a decade, in Luke's time no one disputed the facts that he included in his account of Jesus life and death and resurrection. There is no document in existence that was produced at the time to dispute what Jesus did or how he died or that there was no body in the tomb on the Sunday morning at sun rise.

In other words, in writing that from the very first, these things were believed by the disciples of Jesus, and shared by the disciples of Jesus, is an historical statement that there is no other story behind the story we have been told and called to believe. Luke is writing to tell Theophilus who has been instructed in the faith that finds its focus on the risen Christ, that in his time, the time of Luke and Theophilus, these details about Jesus ministry, His teaching, the miracles, His crucifixion, His resurrection have stand alone power as facts of history. Either Luke witnessed what he included in his account, or he got the details from eye witnesses whom he trusted to be dependable witnesses. Like the 12 but including a number of up to 120 who followed Jesus, and saw and heard what happened. People like Mary and Mary Magdalene. People like those who were healed.

Using the phrase “from the very first” Luke is talking about the beginning of what we call the Christian movement. I use the phrase the Christian movement instead of the Christian Church because in our time the Church is among other things an institution.

It owns property. It has a measure of wealth and a measure of waning power. In Luke's time the word church was and still does mean simply a gathering, a congregation, a group of people like us who gather to worship, to share the faith in Christ life, and to serve others as God leads us.

Luke is telling us that in the beginning these things were believed and held as facts, about Jesus and he wants Theophilus to be certain...absolutely certain...that what he has been told is the truth. His account has come to us. We live in liberal (small l) times. Faith is assumed to be mindless. Moral standards have slipped and the world in which we live in general terms is not faithful to God even though there is a lot of religion to be found in it. Systems of religion are man based and man created. I am not a leader of a religion. I am a man of faith. Faith is a relationship between a person, and God who is real and my neighbours...and that too is not just words. These are facts.

Luke has not set out to write the definitive biography of Jesus. He has set out to put into words those things believed by the followers of Jesus, the disciples from the very beginning. But more than anything else he has set out to tell the story of the crucifixion of Jesus and His resurrection on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. He tells it as he either witnessed it or is convinced he has gotten the straight facts from people who stood in the crowds. This morning's reading takes us to the epicentre of the case and again, these are the facts of a witness who was there or who lived his life with those who were. From the very first.

Charges were brought by members of the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, a council of priests who organized, and ran

the rituals of worship and the Temple in Jerusalem. They had arrested Jesus, and they presented Him as a prisoner along with their charges to the Roman Procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate. As procurator, Pilate not only represented Rome, his voice was law. When he spoke the force of the Emperor was behind his words. He could order someone executed, and no one else in Jerusalem or Judea had that kind of legal authority.

To wield such authority is a two edged sword. If you invoked the power of the Emperor in Rome, you had better be right. Pilate was aware of the reality of politics and Roman law. He was trying to do a number of things at once. He wanted to keep the peace. It was assumed that riots indicated a failure to exercise proper authority. He was trying to keep the peace within the Roman legal system. Even in Pilate's time people had rights. Violate the rights of a citizen of the Empire and Pilate could lose everything his career had brought him. Failing to get it right, could prove costly. And on top of it all was this problem of dealing with people who really believed in the one true God, the living God.

Pilate wanted this legal case to go away. He had tried to shuffle it off to Herod. That did not work. He tried to offer the unruly and noisy crowd a substitute. Crucifixion was serious business. Did you know: it was illegal to crucify a thief for their thievery? You could have them whipped. You could remove the offending hand. But they were not to be executed. Pilate offered the crowd Barabas because he did not believe he had grounds for executing Jesus that would stand up under Imperial review. And what he really was trying to prevent was a riot. As Procurator he was to collect taxes. You do not get tax money from a people in revolt. The crowd chose to spare the murderer Bababas and called for the crucifixion of

Jesus. The crowd was made up mostly of the Sanhedrin and their staff, with onlookers which included the disciples and the women who were close to Mary Jesus mother.

Finally, in frustration and to some degree, fearful of doing anything else, Pilate pronounced the death sentence. The result was the crucifixion of Jesus. We have seen so many images in film and illustrations, paintings and representations of Jesus carrying the cross. That's not how it was done. It may make good art but here are the facts. Crucifixion sites, and Calvary was one of them consisted of strong poles set into the ground. The victim was either tied to a cross beam or fastened by nails puncturing the wrist. The beam was hoisted into place and fastened to the pole, with the victim dangling until the feet were tied or nailed into place. And there they remained until they died. And then they were usually left to rot in the sun as an unspoken message about being law abiding.

The procession set out for Calvary down that road of suffering...Via /Dolorosa. When strength failed and Jesus could no longer carry the cross beam Simon of Cyrene, a tourist, was seized from the crowd and forced to carry the cross beam the rest of the way. It was beneath what was required of a Roman soldier to carry that cross beam. Included in the crowd that follows in Jesus footsteps are those who were closest to Him. And of course the members of the Sanhedrin or their representatives who want to see this thing done and done right. And there are the women, grief stricken, attempting within strict limits to attend to Jesus needs. It is a terrible sight. This Friday's events will end in Jesus death and burial.

This is Lent. We have begun the journey to Calvary. For

believers this is not only a terrible place to be, it is the place where real safety, eternal safety is found. This is why we must ultimately stand at the foot of the cross. We do understand something of crucial importance. This cross is the measure of God's love for us. In the end it is about our redemption. It is here we find forgiveness. It is here we grasp something of eternal life. Here we become capable of enduring even death. And we cannot stand here without remembering what happened 3 days later when the tomb was empty...when the cry breaks out...He is risen. Always remember. These things have been handed down to us by those who were eyewitnesses...from the very first.

Let us pray;

Sovereign God once again we make the journey to the cross. Once again we are sobered by the extent of your love for sinners such as we. Once again we praise your name as we sing of Jesus and taste your Spirit's presence. Grow our faith. Lead us onward. Help us to serve you and your children. Amen