

Scripture Readings for Easter Sunday, April 21st 2019

Luke 24:1-12 (NIV)

24 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” ⁸Then they remembered his words. ⁹When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹²Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

1 Cor 15:19-26 (NIV)

¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³But each in turn: Christ, the first-fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Sermon: A Perplexing Start to the Day!

Today, Christians around the world are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, just as they have done for centuries. Yet even before the Gospels were written, Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. . .”¹ Such words have become a part of our Creeds. And some of you may remember my series of sermons in February from 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul teaches about the significance and importance of the resurrection for the Christian faith, aspects of which were mentioned in our second reading this morning. I’m not going to go over all that again today, but if you missed it - and if you’re curious - I recommend you check out the

¹ 1 Cor 15:3-4.

church's website.² Paul's ideas, though shocking to people then and now, are well-developed and well-argued. But they have very humble beginnings as we heard in our reading from Luke.

Given the widespread difficulty many have in believing in the resurrection of Jesus - that a person who had unequivocally died came back to life three days later with some sort of transformed body - you might think that Luke could have done a more persuasive job in relating the details! We would all like to know the specifics of what was going on in the tomb before the stone was rolled away, but none of the gospel writers relay that kind of information. And what they do tell us leaves more questions than answers. And because we *are* always questioning, the search for we call "proof" will inevitably be elusive. If I was to search for scientific evidence to prove that my wife loved me, the culture of doubt that would arise would most likely ruin our relationship! The element of faith is central to many aspects of life and intellectual reasoning, let alone the fundamentals of Christian belief.³ Nevertheless, in Luke's account there is *not* an awful lot of faith evident early that first Easter morning. And perhaps that's a good place for us to enter the story today.

After the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea was able to get permission from Pilate to take the body of Jesus away for burial.⁴ The women who accompanied Jesus throughout his Galilean ministry followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how Christ's body had been wrapped in a linen cloth within it. Armed with that information, they returned home to prepare aromatic spices to anoint the body. However, it was getting late, the Sabbath had begun and so that task would have to wait for the following day.⁵ They clearly had *no* expectation that Jesus would rise from the dead. At the beginning of that Sunday, they returned to the tomb carrying their prepared spices and were shocked to find that the stone covering the tomb's entrance had been rolled away. Surprised, they nevertheless had the courage to enter the cave and we are told "they did not find the body of Jesus."⁶ They were *perplexed*; "What is going on?" they asked themselves. At which point two heavenly messengers came alongside them.⁷ In many instances, when angels appeared, they calmed their audience with words like, "Peace be with you."⁸ No such greeting is mentioned here and the women were terrified!⁹ The angel's message, however, was clear: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! *Remember* how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'"¹⁰ Their message began with an implied reprimand followed by a proclamation that *Jesus is risen*. The angels don't provide any explanation of what actually happened; the keyword in their short speech is, "*Remember!*"

² See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/worship-and-events/bulletins-and-sermons/>

³ I would also add, "Faith is essential for science too!" See Reddish, *Science and Christianity*, (2016).

⁴ Luke 23:50-53.

⁵ Luke 23:49;55-56. There were very strict rules as to what was permitted on the Sabbath.

⁶ Luke 24:3.

⁷ Luke 24:4-7; see also Luke 9:30; Acts 1:10; Deut 19:15.

⁸ See Luke 1:30; 2:10.

⁹ Luke 24:5.

¹⁰ Luke 24:5b-7.

Let's pause for a moment. We shouldn't be so surprised at the lack of faith that seems to be evident on that first Easter morning. It wasn't just a lack of faith that stopped them from understanding what Jesus had said Galilee about his rising again, it was simply that *nobody* had ever dreamt that *one* single living person would be killed stone dead *and then* be raised with a new sort of bodily life *while* the rest of the world still carried on as before. The whole notion of resurrection was still a controversial concept to first century Jews. If anything, they understood resurrection as being for the far future – on that “Great Day of the Lord” when God finally stepped into history and put the world to right and restored Israel's central place within in. Being perplexed, confused, fearful, and surprised was, then, quite understandable.

All the angels said was, “Remember what Jesus *told* you earlier, that he would be crucified and rise again on the third day.” Note they did *not* say, “Remember the *miracles* God did through Jesus; well, this is one more!” Earlier in Luke, he informs us that Jesus had *told* the disciples about these Easter events in *three* separate warnings,¹¹ as well as hinting at them in some of his parables.¹² And Luke then simply adds, “*The women remembered.*”¹³ You can imagine their thought processes: “Yes, Jesus did say something like this would occur, but we still don't know what's going on, or what it all means, or what will happen next.” You see, whatever had happened, they could see *no* meaning in the crucifixion of Jesus. It was just one of ‘a series of unfortunate events’ that now seemed all equally meaningless; a tragic anticlimax from what they expected to a week ago, when Jesus came into Jerusalem as a king riding on a donkey. But in their remembering, they went back to the other disciples and friends and told them what they had *witnessed* and *recalled*.¹⁴ However, the men thought they were talking complete nonsense; they too had *no* expectation of Jesus being resurrected.¹⁵

What does all this mean? Our reading this morning provides a helpful foundation as there is (first) the evidence of the empty tomb, (second) the message of the angels, and (third) the remembering of the words of Jesus. This is a combination of objective *and* subjective evidence. The tomb was empty; multiple women witnessed that and all the gospel writers attest to that fact. Of course, the evidence of an empty tomb does not, on its own, provide a firm basis the resurrection; all it means is that the body was not there. However, if the religious or political authorities could have produced the dead body of Jesus, any claims that he was resurrected would have been instantly refuted. Obviously, that did not occur. Luke goes on to emphasise that genuine Easter faith was *also* based on post-resurrection appearances; *personal encounters* with the risen Lord, such as that which occurred on the road to

¹¹ Luke 9:22;44; 18:31-34. No mention is made of the *type* of death – crucifixion. Moreover, the divine “must” shows Luke's understanding of providence.

¹² See Luke 15:24, 32; 16:31.

¹³ Luke 24:8.

¹⁴ This means that these women who journeyed with Jesus were part of the inner group to know of these conversations. They are named in Luke 24:8; given there were *multiple* witnesses, they *should* have been credible.

¹⁵ Consequently, it wouldn't have made any difference if those first witnesses at the tomb were men, rather than women. We are then told that on hearing this report, Peter ran to the tomb and also saw that it was empty, except for the strips of cloth, and went home *wondering* what had happened (Luke 24:12). See also v24 which suggests Peter was *not* alone! Presumably v34 refers to some other occasion.

Emmaus – which we will consider next week.¹⁶ Testimonies *are* potent and we should not try to simply reduce this unique event to an examination of the historical or physical evidence alone.¹⁷

Luke's two angels move the narrative on by saying "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"¹⁸ This affirms that the women were looking in the right place, even though we have no grounds to doubt that. Moreover, it answers those who would question if his body had been moved or stolen by graverobbers; no, Jesus has risen just as he said would. And while I believe this message is true, I fully accept that this claim would be rejected by many, not because of the content of the message itself, but simply because of the nature of the messenger; rational¹⁹ people don't believe in the existence of angels (regardless of what they may say)!²⁰

As I alluded to earlier, the events of Good Friday resulted in a *crisis of faith* for the followers of Jesus. Resurrection was *not* on their mind and they were in a numbed state of shock and confusion. The angels command to "remember" is a good thing to do in a crisis of faith, however that arises. Such crises occur because *our* understanding of the nature of God and of how God works in the world do *not* fit our present circumstances. It is very easy to go through life without asking these 'deeper' questions. It is only when we face our own mortality, or have an intense connection with personal suffering, that we begin to ask the big questions life, the universe, and everything. That was certainly the case for the followers of Jesus here. Indeed, after the post-resurrection appearances, the Ascension, and Pentecost, the early church began to address how the death and resurrection²¹ changed their understanding of the identity of Jesus and the nature of God. It also transformed their understanding of God's purposes and the way God works in the world.²² Be that as it may, a good starting point for us in a crisis today is to *remember* our past experiences of Jesus in our lives and the things we have learnt along the way. Remembering God's presence in the past can give us the resources and a perspective for dealing with present. This starting point may be revised in light of our new experiences, but it is an appropriate place to begin. In this specific case, the women "remembered what Jesus had said earlier about his death and coming back to life."²³ All their burning, pertinent questions were *not* answered; things were still very confusing, but it provided them a confident basis for hope as they sought to make sense of God's strange activity in present events. They did *not* stay at the tomb, "looking for the dead," but their

¹⁶ Luke 24:13-35. Luke's second volume (Acts) also shows how many believed this amazing account.

¹⁷ It is therefore crucial that risen Jesus is affirmed by our *own* experience. Without that, there would be no gospel to proclaim, as Paul also makes very clear.

¹⁸ Luke 24:5b-6a. The old philosophical question - "If a person dies, will they live again?" (Job 14:14) - has been answered!

¹⁹ Perhaps I should say "scientific materialists," rather than "rationalists," but forgive my lack of technical wording here!

²⁰ Curiously, these divine messengers *don't* provide detailed information to prove their point. They simply tell the women to *remember* what Jesus said earlier.

²¹ The New Testament has never suggested that the death of Jesus would be adequate for salvation apart from the resurrection; the two were fused together. It is not just that someone was crucified, but that Jesus was crucified. And it is not just that someone was raised from the dead, but that God raised this same Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is God's response to Jesus' death, God's vindication of Jesus as a person, and God's validation his kingdom message.

²² We see this especially in Paul's writings.

²³ Luke 9:22; 18:32-33.

memories of Jesus,²⁴ along with the angels' message of "He is risen," caused them to tell others of this shocking and amazing news.

Luke presents a perplexing start to Easter Sunday, one that simply fills the reader with suspense; "Will the disciples come to believe that Jesus is risen?" "Yes," is the short answer; but that recognition doesn't occur instantly. I encourage those today who simply consider Jesus to be an inspirational, noble man who died a tragic death, and whose life and teachings are worthy of being examined, to *stop* treating Jesus as if he were dead. *He is alive!* If Jesus had *not* risen from the dead, the church itself would not be here. If the resurrection had *not* occurred, we would never even have heard of Jesus. Yes, Luke starts Easter morning by presenting a great deal of doubt and disbelief, but he doesn't end it there. If that is you today, don't stay in that state but read on. God is full of surprises – then and now. Easter is not over in a day; it is the beginning of a new phase of history.

This last week we all witnessed the tragic fire at Notre Dame in Paris. And there has been a great deal of emotion displayed, and rhetoric and hyperbole proclaimed,²⁵ both on the evening of the fire and ever since. Like many, I was moved by my own experience of Notre Dame and, without doubt, it is very sad that this historic place of worship and scholarship has been so decimated. The timing with Easter week adds irony, and the stated intent to quickly rebuild has a phoenix-like quality about it; some might even call it a "resurrection." But let's be clear, for France, Notre Dame is also wrapped in a nationalistic flag – it is *not* merely a historical place of Christian worship, and this complicates the rationale for its rebuilding.²⁶ And, important though medieval cathedrals are as sacred spaces, from a Christian perspective, the church is much more than a building or a historic tradition that is somehow worthy of maintaining even if the majority of the populace no longer believe in its message. Like the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral in Britain after World War II, I hope Notre Dame will be rebuilt to the glory of God, *not* of a nation, and *not* to the brilliance of human ingenuity and skill. And I hope that this will remind people of the basis of our faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus – and *not* as a means to glorify the *institution* of the Church. Although buildings, artefacts, and relics can *inspire* faith, our faith is ultimately *not in* those things.²⁷ Though beautiful, they are inanimate, dead; *Jesus is not dead, he is alive.* At this time of new beginnings for Notre Dame, Luke reminds us that the mysterious Easter Sunday event began not with faith, but in doubt. Many people in France - and throughout the world - were reminded this week of the Christian heritage that Notre Dame represents. My fervent hope for them - and for us - is that we will reflect further on the profound meaning of the events of Easter. As I said earlier, Easter is not over in a day – or even a week; it is the beginning of a new phase of history. The resurrection demonstrates that God is still powerfully at work in history! Let us pray.

²⁴ i.e., his earlier telling them to *expect* these events when he came to Jerusalem

²⁵ This kind of national outpouring of grief also occurred following the tragic death of Lady Diana.

²⁶ Whenever nationalism and religion combine, that is a potent and dangerous combination.

²⁷ Even if that is the crown of thorns, a nail from the cross – or the Turin Shroud.