

April 8, 2007  
God's Promises Are True Every Time  
Luke 24: 1-12

On an early Sunday morning, women make their way to the tomb of Jesus. We don't know for sure how many women go to the tomb. A few verses later some of the women are named but not all of them. What are they thinking as they make their way to the graveyard? From Mark we learn that they are worried about who would remove the large stone placed at the entrance of the tomb. But there must have been other thoughts as well—private thoughts. Why did he have to die? What are we going to do now?

With all kinds of thoughts swirling around in their hearts and minds the women finally reach the tomb. But is it the right tomb? The large stone has been rolled away. They look this way and that. Yes, this is the right place. They glance inside. There is no body. The tomb is empty. The women are confused.

Have you ever been awakened at night from a deep sleep by a phone ringing or maybe a bang on the door? The brain has to switch from *off* to *on* so suddenly that it takes a second for you to realize where you are, what is happening. I imagine these women have similar feelings.

And in the midst of this unsettling awkwardness, two men appear in dazzling clothing. Are they mere mortals or are they angels? The Bible doesn't tell us exactly. The women must have been reeling with confusion. What is going on? Please someone tell me what is happening.

Then the men (or are they angels?) speak: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen." Wow! I can't even begin to imagine what thoughts are rushing through the minds and hearts of these women. That they are in shock would be an understatement.

Even after 2,000 years the words of resurrection do not fit neatly into any category of human understanding. Yet, the reason we came to church this morning is because we believe the words "he is risen" to be true. These words, "he is not here; he is risen," change everything, don't they? If Christ is risen, then our world is not a dead end. God, indeed, is with us. Our tiny planet is not lost in space as it

moves silently through the vast universe, but is rather the object of God's care and love where even death does not separate the creation from the Creator.

The French war hero Charles de Gaulle and his wife, Yvonne, had a little girl named Anne, who was severely disabled. Yvonne struggled with her daughter's handicap and often asked why she couldn't be like all the other little girls. Anne did not live long and died while still a child. When the funeral service was over Yvonne would not leave the cemetery. She remained at their daughter's grave, weeping. Finally, Charles went to his wife and whispered in her ear, "Didn't you listen to the priest? She is like all the others now." The words of resurrection give teeth to what the priest said. If the resurrection is true, then the little girl is truly now like all the others.

Yes, the words "he is not here; he is risen" change the way we view everything, including death. The resurrection of Jesus provides a different lens by which to view the world. In the light of the empty tomb, how we live and what we value all take on new meaning. Maybe the words "he is not here; he is risen" give you comfort. Would you be open to the possibility that these words are true?

We are not told if the women believe these words immediately. They leave the tomb and find the disciples and tell them what they have seen and experienced. The disciples do not believe the women. Their story sounds to them like "nonsense." I find it revealing that the disciples don't believe at first. It lends credibility to the story. The disciples need time to digest the words, to think and pray about them. So do we.

For a good many people the resurrection of Jesus seems like nonsense. In this week's *Newsweek* magazine there is an interview with Rick Warren, pastor of a mega-church in California, and atheist Sam Harris, who has written several influential articles on why faith, in his opinion, is an absurdity, something that any intelligent person should stay far away from. Harris rejects the story of the resurrection. He, too, says it is nonsense. Pastor Rick Warren, on the other hand, believes the words "he is not here; he is risen." Warren adds that the Christian faith rests entirely on the resurrection of Jesus.

Warren is absolutely right. Without the resurrection of Jesus the Christian faith has no story to tell. Paul writes that "if Christ be not raised, then our faith is in vain" (I Cor. 15:14). Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, once said that people in the congregation have one burning question: "Is it true? Is it true?"

The writers of the resurrection, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John leave us with a lot of unanswered questions, that's for sure. There is an empty tomb but where is the body. Are the two messengers angels or just men? Why isn't the text clear about these things? When Peter runs to the tomb and glances inside and discovers it empty, he goes away "wondering" what has happened. The resurrection stories in all the Gospels leave a lot of ambiguity, uncertainty. As one preacher put it, "That's no way to run a resurrection."

Had I been in charge of the resurrection, I think I would have handled it differently. Why couldn't Jesus have gone back to the Sanhedrin, for instance? He could have showed up for one of their meetings and surprised them. "Hey, boys, remember me? Thought you got rid of me, huh? Well, I'm back. Want to go another round?" Or maybe Jesus

could have appeared in the temple confronting those very people who had shouted, “Crucify him, crucify him!” He could have shown his nail-scarred hands and feet. He could have grinned and said, “Say, you fellows want to try that again?”

But the resurrection is not nearly so neat, tidy and clear-cut. The women are confused, Peter is confused. Later, when the disciples actually see Jesus they are still unsettled, not certain who he is. They think he is a ghost. Quite simply the resurrection does not remove the need for faith.

The temptation for Jesus to jump off the temple offers an important insight into the way God works. If Jesus had jumped from the temple and angels had rescued him, the news would have been all over Israel. Everyone would have believed that Jesus was Messiah. But there are no shortcuts to God. He never seeks to intrude into our lives with such objective clarity that the venture of faith is removed. Intentionally, the words “he is not here; he is risen” are not easy words for us to get our hearts and minds around. Belief in the resurrection gently enters our hearts through the door of faith.

I suppose we all have faith in something. We exercise faith in our doctors, pension plans, physical fitness programs, technology and a host of other things. But will the objects of our faith see us through the most difficult journeys of life?

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, an expert on death and dying, writes that while studying terminally ill patients in a hospital, she discovered that on one of the floors, patients seemed to be dying with a greater sense of hope and confidence. For some reason these patients faced their illnesses with greater acceptance and courage. She thought at first that perhaps these dying people were receiving better medical treatment. Soon she learned that was not the case. The nurses pointed Dr. Kubler Ross to one of the cleaning ladies as perhaps a clue as to why these patients were going through their final days of life with such confidence.

When Dr. Kubler Ross interviewed the cleaning lady, the elderly woman confessed that she had been speaking to the patients. She told them of losing two daughters and how Jesus was with her during her grief. She confessed that through her entire grief, she felt a special closeness to God. “He never left me,” the woman said. “I just tell these people that Jesus will be right there with them. Yes, sir, he will never leave them. That’s what I tell them. He will never leave them. Just place your trust in him.” Faith in the words “he is not here; he is risen” changes everything, doesn’t it?

Perhaps there are some people here this morning who are also confused, unsettled and uncertain about all of this resurrection talk. That’s okay. You’re in a safe place. No one is going to give you the boot just because you have some doubts. Easter Sunday encourages us that searching for Jesus, looking to see if he really is alive is a step in the right direction. That’s what Peter does when he runs to the tomb. He is searching, trying to see if these words, “he is not here; he is risen” are true. If you’re searching this morning, that’s okay. You’ve come to the right place.

How does one move from confusion and wondering to faith? Faith appears so flimsy in our world of science and technology. But is it? Part of our struggle is that we have grown up with a scientific view of the world. We have been taught to believe only what we can prove, what we can demonstrate. If I say, for example, water boils at 100 degrees Celsius, you might not believe me; so you say prove it. I take you into the kitchen and we place a pan of water on the stove with a thermometer and begin to heat the water. When the water reaches 100 degrees, presto, the water begins to boil. We do the experiment over and over again and the results are the same. You believe that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius because you have tested the theory and it proves to be true. Science teaches, we are led to believe, that only that which can be verified is true. Since resurrection cannot be confirmed or proven, then it must be rejected-or so the argument from science runs.

But according to Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn, highly respected scientists, science isn’t always able to prove its theories. There are a great many theories that are beyond science’s ability to prove. Yet science operates on the basis that these theories are true. Moreover, these theories are often formulated based on intuition, sometimes imagination. Einstein said, “The mechanics of discovery are neither logical nor intellectual. It’s a sudden illumination, almost a rapture. Later, to be sure, intelligence and analysis and experiment confirm the intuition. But initially there is a great leap of the imagination.”

If I understand Einstein correctly then science moves forward at times by taking a “great leap of the imagination.” Umm! In other words, science often advances without certainty, without objective proof, using instead “imagination, intuition and illumination.” How quaint! The Bible has another word for “imagination or intuition or illumination. It is the word *faith*. Faith operates the same way that imagination and intuition work. A Christian’s life is based on this theory of faith. We have faith that the words “he is not here; he is risen” are true. Yes, we cannot prove this theory, yet we are operating our lives based on this theory of faith. And like science we are confirming our faith through “intelligence, and analysis and experiment.”

Confirmation comes in a variety of ways. A little later two disciples are walking home toward Emmaus. They meet a stranger along the way and start discussing religion. They do not know who this man is but enjoy his company and when they arrive home, invite the stranger for supper. The stranger breaks bread with them and it is then the two realize that they have been in the presence of the risen Jesus. Through intelligence, analysis and experiment they confirm that Jesus is alive and was with them. As evidence the two disciples tell others when he was with us “our hearts [were] burning within us” (v.32). Isn’t the presence of Christ with us evidence that he lives? The hymn says it well, “He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today. He walks with me and talks with me, along life’s narrow way. He lives, he lives, salvation to impart. You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart.”

I have a friend who is a member of a very formal and liturgical church in the Princeton area. The church prides itself on its intellectual and academic standing in the community. My friend started a conversation with one of the elderly members of the church one day and was surprised to learn that this particular man had been a member of the church over fifty years. And then the man somewhat dryly said, “Yep, and in all that time I haven’t understood a sermon yet.”

“Well, why do you stay?” my friend asked. The soft-spoken man replied, “Years ago I became involved in a ministry with kids. Every weekend I get to spend half a day with kids who have no parents and I love every minute of it. I take them to ball games, movies and out to eat. I look forward to this more than anything in my life. Sometimes I tell these kids about Jesus. I’ve watched as these children have grown up and sometimes I even follow them through their adult years. Yes, sir, I’ve seen God do some amazing things with this ministry of working with kids.”

And then he looked at my friend and said, “You know, you can’t prove the promises of God. But if you live them out, they turn out to be true every time.” Wow!

No one ever comes to Jesus with all their questions settled. Just like the stories in the Bible about the resurrection there is a lot of ambiguity and confusion when we hear the words “he is risen.” But if we open our hearts to these words, allow God to nudge his way into our lives, then follow him, we discover God’s promises to be true every time.

Open your life to faith. Believe the words, “he is not here; he is risen,” and you will soon know that all of God’s promises are true--every time. Amen.