

The Resurrection of Jesus
Luke 24:1-12
Easter Sunday, Year C April 20, 2025
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! With these traditional words of Easter greeting, we welcome each of you to our service. Whether you are a first-time visitor, an occasional guest, or a regular attendee, we pray that each of you will be blessed by God as you participate in worship on this most holy day of the Christian year.

We've come through the season of Lent as we prepared ourselves for this special day. We trust that the discoveries you made about yourself and about Jesus will continue to guide you on your spiritual journey. But today we set aside the Lenten stories of Jesus' heartbreak over Jerusalem, the barren fig tree, and the nard of Mary of Bethany, and look ahead to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the founding of the church in fifty days. Much awaits us, but for today we will bask in the awe of finding that Jesus was no longer dead in the tomb but had been raised. This occurred on the third day, just as Jesus had told his disciples it would.

As we have seen with several other stories, the account of the resurrection is told in all four Gospels. And, like other stories we have read, details vary from one Gospel writer to another. But those variations should not concern us. The message that comes through loud and clear is that death could not hold Jesus. No, God raised him from the dead. Beyond that, the church through the ages has taught us that because he lives, we too shall live. I can't imagine any better news than this!

Our focus today will be on Luke's report of the resurrection, which is found in chapter 24, verses 1-12. As the curtain opens, we're aware that it's the first day of the week, which means that it's Sunday. It's dawn, so the sun may just be peaking through. We see a group of women going to the tomb to perform the burial ritual of anointing the deceased's body with spices. As the women arrive, they are surprised to find that there is no body to anoint. Instead, the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty (24:2).

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order of priests, taught us to envision ourselves in the story. His method was called Ignatian Contemplation. We can immerse ourselves in the Bible stories by engaging our senses and emotions. As we do this, we are deepening our understanding of the text and our connection with God. Having said that, I want you to imagine yourself arriving with an entourage of women at the tomb carrying the spices they have lovingly prepared. You may have planned out what you thought you were going to do, but your plans are disrupted. Things are not as you expected them to be. As you are thinking over what you need to do next, two figures in dazzling clothes appear beside you (24:4). You and the women bow down, terrified. I'm not sure that I can completely understand their response, but I sure would have been petrified as well. Who are these beings? Are they men? Angels? Something I know nothing about? I would have been quaking in my sandals!

These beings begin to speak, and their words are actually reassuring. They ask:

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again."

The two figures in dazzling clothes help the women call to mind Jesus' predictions of his passion and death. The first instance, found in Luke 9:21-22, immediately follows Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus again speaks about his impending betrayal in Luke 9:43-45. In Luke 18:31-34, Jesus clearly spells out what will happen to him, but the disciples "did not grasp what was said" (18:34).

Once they were reminded about his words, the women who had gathered at the tomb *did* remember what Jesus had said. They retreated from the tomb and returned to recount their experience to the *eleven* disciples. Remember that when Judas realized Jesus was about to be crucified, Judas repented, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Matthew 27:3). He brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, perhaps believing that he could undo the terrible damage he had done. Judas tried to return the money he had been paid, but the religious leaders wouldn't take it because this was "blood money" (27:6). Having been rebuffed, Judas threw down the coins in the temple and went out and hanged himself (27:7). The leaders would not put the money in the treasury, but they did use it to buy land in which to bury foreigners, which was known as the Field of Blood. And until a replacement for Judas was chosen, who was named Matthias (Acts 1:21-26), there were only the eleven disciples who are mentioned in today's account.

Luke names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. He also refers to an unspecified number of unnamed women who had witnessed the appearance of the beings who looked like men, but who were probably angels. If this many people testified to a story, I would certainly believe their words. And I imagine you would too, but the eleven thought this was an "idle tale" (Luke 24:11) and so did not believe them.

I imagine that many of us have been taught that the reason for the disciples' disbelief was that Jews do not accept the testimony of women. In *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Amy-Jill (AJ) Levine points out that this understanding is incorrect. She suggests that the real reason the men did not believe the women was that "they do not expect to see Jesus rise (John 20:25; page 165, footnote Luke 24:11). Well, that certainly puts a different spin on how the Easter event is interpreted. If AJ is correct, then the women are far more open to Jesus' resurrection and do believe what seems to be absolutely impossible. Perhaps both of these explanations have merit. But, whatever the reason for disbelief, the men do not believe the women's story. They didn't have the imagination to ask, "Could the tomb really be empty?"

Today's reading closes with a bit of a reversal. We don't know Peter's initial reaction, but we are told that upon hearing from the women, he went to the tomb to check things out for himself. He stooped down and could see linen grave cloths, but the body was nowhere to be seen. Just because the body is gone, however, doesn't mean that Jesus has risen from the dead, even though that's what he said would happen. There are other explanations. Matthew's account, for example, wants us to consider the possibility that Jesus' body was stolen (Matthew 28:11-15). But honestly, if you were out to steal the body of someone as famous as Jesus, would you stop to leave the shroud, or would you just gather up Jesus and beat a hasty retreat? I think most of us would try to get out as quickly as possible. We know that Peter was "amazed" (Luke 24:12) by what he saw, or more properly phrased, by what he didn't see. But let's be clear: People were immediately spinning stories to explain the disappearance of Jesus' body. At this point, we really don't know what Peter or any of the other disciples are thinking about where he may be. Next week, we'll get a better understanding from John's Gospel (20:19-31).

Although Luke's report of the walk to Emmaus, doesn't appear in the lectionary until the Ascension in May, that, too, gives us a different idea about how people understood what happened to Jesus.

Let's get back to the idea of putting ourselves in the story. Where are you? Are you one of the women who has gone to the tomb, or are you one of the men back at their base camp? If you are with the women, what do you make of the words of the two in dazzling clothes? If you're one of the men, are you willing to listen to the women and at least entertain the possibility that Jesus has been raised from the dead, or don't you believe that's possible?

What about your current perspective? Today, do you truly believe, as we say in our Apostles' Creed each week, that Jesus "was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven"? And continuing a bit further, that you believe in "the resurrection of the body"? Now it would be unfair to compare what we believe to what the apostles believed at the time. After all, we have had over 2000 years of church history and teaching to better understand what the church through the ages has thought about the events of Easter morning. But Jesus' resurrection is the crux of his entire ministry. Much as many folks might prefer to celebrate Jesus' incarnation as a baby born at Christmas and forget Easter, the reality is that without his crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension his birthday would be nothing special to celebrate.

So far, we've talked about believing that God raised Jesus from the dead. *Knowing* about the resurrection and *believing* that it happened are both important, but this knowledge does not constitute a full response to the resurrection. No, as with every other Bible passage we've explored, we now have to figure out how we will live out what we've read. Our belief in the resurrection must prompt us to change how we live. We are empowered to live following the teachings and way of Jesus and to share his good news with others.

So, what are some practical ways we can do this?

First on this list would, of course, be prayer. Particularly as you think of the events of Holy Week and Easter Sunday, you can ask God to help you better understand the meaning of Jesus' resurrection.

As always, studying the Bible will give you ideas as to how God expects you to respond to Jesus' resurrection.

Third, you can respond with praise and worship. As you think of Jesus' resurrection, you can give thanks to God for the power and grace that enabled this life-changing event to occur.

Next, you can respond to Jesus' resurrection by sharing this good news with others. Let them know how your belief in the resurrection has changed your life.

Another practical response to Jesus' resurrection is to use your talents and financial resources to help build up the kingdom of God. Your church needs volunteers to serve on committees. The church also needs money to keep the lights on and the building maintained. You may be thinking that these ideas all sound good, but ask where you can see any of them in action. The Bible gives us examples of people's lives that were transformed as a result of Jesus' resurrection. We remember how the apostles were fearful observers. They saw what happened to Jesus and so hid behind closed doors, hoping to avoid the same fate. But after the Holy Spirit fell on them at Pentecost, they began to proclaim

the good news of the resurrection. A second example is Paul, formerly known as a fierce persecutor of Christians who was then named Saul. After encountering the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul became a fearless spokesperson for the faith. He not only talked the talk but faithfully walked the walk, no matter where that led him.

Our challenge this week is twofold. First, determine what you believe about Jesus' resurrection. Consider reading all four accounts from Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1-18; and our reading for today from Luke 24:1-12. You may easily accept some ideas, but you may also need to look with the eyes of faith to accept others. Next, examine your own life to see how you are already responding to Jesus. What new ideas have you gleaned from your reading? Which ones will you try to implement?

We've considered a lot of theologically heavy material, so I want to close with a light-hearted story.

A man took a vacation to Israel with his wife and mother-in-law. During their time in the Holy Land, his mother-in-law unexpectedly passed away. The following day, the husband met with the local undertaker to discuss funeral plans. "In cases like these, there are a couple of options to choose from," the undertaker explained. "You can ship the body home for \$5,000, or you can bury her in the Holy Land for just \$150." The man took a minute to think about it, and then announced his decision to ship her home. The undertaker, intrigued by his decision, said, "That's an interesting choice. Can I ask why would you pay \$5,000 to ship your mother-in-law home, when you can easily bury her here for \$150?" The man promptly replied, "About 2,000 years ago, a man died and was buried here. Three days later he rose from the dead, and I can't take that chance!"

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