

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Sorting Out Easter

Luke 24:1-12

One person tells the story about a packed Good Friday service at a church in Bangladesh:

Little children sat on the floor in the aisles and across the front of the church. Rows of people stood in the back, craning their necks to see the crucifixion scene as depicted in the "Jesus Film."

Weeping and gasps of unbelief could be heard in the shocked hush as Jesus was crucified. As the Bengalis watched, they were feeling the agony of Jesus' pain and the disappointment of the disciples.

In that emotional moment, one young boy in the crowded church suddenly cried out, "Do not be afraid. He gets up again! I saw it before."¹

Most of you here today have seen it before. You know the story. This isn't your first trip from the cross to the empty tomb. "Christ is risen!" He does get up again. That's what you expected to hear on this Sunday.

But even if the good news isn't new to you, there's still much more of it that you and I need to grasp. Or better yet, more of the news that needs to grasp us. After all, the goal isn't to fully comprehend exactly how it all happened. The details of the resurrection aren't disclosed to us. There were no remote cameras positioned near the tomb, ready to capture the precise moment that Jesus exited the grave. That part is a mystery to us. But, as preacher Fleming Rutledge has pointed out, "God intended it that way. He never meant for it to be within our comprehension. It is out of our range of understanding because it comes from another sphere of reality."²

When the women came to the tomb that morning, they were still playing by the rules of the old sphere of reality. In that reality, the dead stay dead. They don't come back to life. The best you can do is treat the deceased with respect. So the women arrive prepared to care for the body of Jesus, until they discover that there is no body.

At first, they're stymied and perplexed. They don't immediately conclude, "Oh, this all makes perfect sense. It's just like Jesus said. God has raised him from the dead!" Instead, they need help, heavenly help, in order to begin to understand what has happened. Radiant messengers show up and announce the truth: "He is not here; he has risen!"

Like I said, familiar news on a familiar day. But even though we as listeners know something that the women don't yet know, we can't really sit back and act as if we ourselves have completely mastered the Easter message. The truth is, we ourselves are still vulnerable to distortions or misconceptions about what resurrection means, both as an article of faith and as a way of life. So in the midst of all the buzz and hype about Easter, especially within the larger culture, it helps to step back and clarify what we mean, and what we don't mean, when we declare that Jesus lives.

For one thing, when we proclaim that Christ is risen, we mean more than just the fact that spring has returned. Yes, the weather has gotten warmer and the days have gotten longer. Flowers have emerged and trees have been blooming. The cherry blossoms recently came forth around the Tidal Basin. Neighbors are cranking their lawnmowers and landscaping crews are hard at work. Birds are singing and bunnies are bouncing. All these things are refreshing signs of God's creative faithfulness and life-giving power. They testify to the reality of renewal. But they're not the same thing as God overcoming death by raising Jesus.

Secondly, when we proclaim that Christ is risen, we don't mean that he simply lives on in the hearts and minds of his followers. Yes, we have the testimony of Scripture, and the traditions of the church, to preserve what Jesus said and did while on this earth. We hand on what has been handed on to us. But preaching the risen Lord means way more than just keeping alive the story of his life and ministry, to ensure that he's never forgotten and to shape the way we live. Yes, Jesus is present in the lives of his followers, individually and together. But that's different from reducing the resurrection to a living memory.

It's also important to emphasize that when we say Jesus has been raised from the dead, we're not simply saying that when he died he went to heaven to be with God. Yes, we affirm that a believer's relationship with God doesn't end at death, but continues beyond the grave, in a deepened fellowship with the Lord. That's part of what we mean when we say that a believer is "with the Lord" after he or she dies. But that's different from the resurrection of the body. The Easter narratives in the Gospels don't say that Jesus' body was just a shell for his soul, which then returned to God after the crucifixion. Instead, the written witness from Luke, and the other Gospel writers, points to an empty tomb, and thus to a transformation of Jesus' body.

That's also why, when we confess that Christ is risen, we don't mean that he simply got his old body back, so that he could return to his disciples and pick up where he and they had left off. One person tells the story of a woman who looked out her window and saw her German shepherd shaking the life out of a neighbor's rabbit. She and her family didn't get along well with these neighbors to begin with, so she knew this situation would just make matters worse. She grabbed a broom and struck the dog until it dropped the rabbit from its mouth. Realizing that the rabbit was dead, she panicked. She grabbed the rabbit, took it inside, gave it a bath, blow dried it to its original fluffiness, and combed it until it looked like a rabbit again. Then she snuck into the neighbor's yard and propped the rabbit back up in its cage. An hour later she heard screams coming from next door. She asked her neighbor what was going on. "Our rabbit! Our rabbit!" her neighbor cried. "He died two weeks ago. We buried him, and now he's back!"³

When we proclaim that Jesus was raised from the dead, we're not just saying that he's back. We're not declaring that God revived him, cleaned him up, and put him back in circulation, in a slightly improved condition. No, the good news that we preach and practice isn't about resuscitation. It's about resurrection. Resurrection means being raised bodily from the dead. It means being rescued from the power of death and given a transformed body fit for the reign of God, the new creation in Christ. That's why Easter is about more than just the resurrection of Jesus. It's also about the resurrection of all those who are joined to Jesus by faith. It's about the life of the world to come, already showing up in the midst of the life of this present world that's passing away.

Remember that the women who came to the tomb, as well as the other disciples in Luke's Easter story, were Jewish. Though the afterlife was part of their understanding of God and

the world, their primary belief was in resurrection. They recognized that the world is a mess, distorted by human rebellion and unrighteousness. But God is righteous, and his ultimate purpose is to rescue his people and to use them in revealing his glory to the world. According to Jewish belief, God, out of his unfailing love, would intervene in this world of suffering and evil. He would act, in forgiveness and saving power, to rectify the state of the world and bring about a new creation.

But nobody in Israel was expecting God to raise one person in the middle of history, as God did with Jesus. With time, the followers of Jesus saw more clearly that this wasn't a one-off miracle, a rabbit that God pulled out of his hat to impress the world. No, this was the beginning of God's new world, a world redeemed and restored in Christ. This was the future that God had promised, erupting into the present. I like the way N. T. Wright puts it: "Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of that new life, the fresh grass growing through the concrete of corruption and decay in the old world."⁴ So the raising of Jesus was the beginning of the end, a foretaste of what would arrive in fullness at the coming of the Lord, and the resurrection of the dead.

Earlier, I shared a lighthearted story about a dog and a dead bunny. Let me also share a more somber account about a pet and the meaning of Easter. It comes from author Philip Yancey. Yancey says that during his early childhood, he associated Easter with death, not resurrection, because of what happened one sunny Easter Sunday to the only cat he ever owned. Boots, his six-week-old kitten, was playing with Yancey and his friends during their Easter egg hunt. When the children from next door arrived, their dog Pugs followed them into the yard, spotted Boots, charged, and grabbed the tiny kitten in his mouth. The terrified children shrieked and screamed and tried to scare the dog off. But soon Boots was lying in the grass, dead. Yancey writes,

I could not have articulated it at the time, but what I learned that Easter under the noonday sun was the ugly word *irreversible*." All afternoon I prayed for a miracle. *No! It can't be! Tell me it's not true!* Maybe Boots would come back—hadn't the Sunday school teacher told such a story about Jesus? Or maybe the whole morning could somehow be erased, rewind, and played over again minus that horrid scene. We could keep boots on the screen porch forever, never allowing her outside. Or we could talk our neighbors into building a fence for Pugs. A thousand schemes ran through my mind over the next days until reality won out and I accepted at last that Boots was dead. Irreversibly dead.⁵

Yancey admits that over the years, particularly at funerals, that old word *irreversible* would come flooding back. But he also writes that in the midst of grief over the death of loved ones, he began to see the meaning of Easter in a new light. As an adult, the resurrection helped him see that even death was not final. It could be reversed. I love the way Yancey puts it when he says, "Easter hits a new note of hope and faith that what God did once in a graveyard in Jerusalem, he can and will repeat on a grand scale."⁶

That's where today's text begins and ends, in the graveyard, at the tomb. But the tomb is empty. And those who come to this tomb are still trying to sort out exactly what has happened, and what it all means for their lives. So it is for the women who arrived early in the morning. So it is for Peter, who ran to the tomb, found the burial clothes lying there, and "went away, wondering to himself what had happened" (v. 12). No matter how many times you've heard the good news that Christ is risen, maybe you're still, in some respects, sorting out what has happened and what it means for you. It means more than just the fact that spring has sprung, or that the memory of Jesus lives on, or that he suddenly just reappeared. It means that Jesus was bodily raised from among the dead. It means that a loving God doesn't abandon or forsake this dying world. And it means that through faith in the risen Jesus, you can experience the forgiveness of sins and the transforming power of

God, who gives life to the dead. You can exit your tomb of sin and death, enter into the life of the world to come, and live a life of hope, toward the day when the dead in Christ are raised and the saving judgment of God brings his will for the world to completion.

¹ William D. Barrick, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 35, No. 2.

² Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 280.

³ Ken Davis, as told by John Ortberg in his sermon, "The World's Greatest Step." Preaching Today website. Accessed April 17, 2019 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/july/worldsgreateststep.html>>.

⁴ N. T. Wright, with Kevin and Sherry Harney, *Surprised by Hope Participant's Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) 27.

⁵ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 210.

⁶ Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, 211.