

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Let Easter Sink In**

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."<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup>

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 honor the deceased and treat them 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!" No, they're frightened and confused. There's nothing about their experience of the empty tomb that makes faith easy or automatic. Instead, the women 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!"

It's one thing for us to make that announcement and affirm that good news from where we are now, on this side of that first Easter morning. But for those first followers of Jesus, the journey to faith in a risen Christ passed through shock, bewilderment, and disbelief. When the women report their empty tomb discovery and their encounter with angels to the apostles, they're met with skepticism and resistance. The apostles view the women's testimony as an "idle tale" (v. 11). In other words, nonsense, something made up. So when Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them

became the first preachers of the resurrection, they didn't get an "Amen" from the crowd. Instead, they got, "Ridiculous, you're just dreaming." The apostles, for the most part, were unmoved.

Peter, however, doesn't seem quite as ready to completely reject the women's testimony. He's at least willing to check things out for himself. In fact, Luke says that Peter ran to the tomb to investigate. He sees the linen clothes by themselves and then leaves. It sounds like he departs from the tomb not as a complete doubter nor as a complete believer. He senses that something has happened. What he's left with is primarily an experience of perplexity and amazement. Maybe he's at least wondering what may be ahead. After all, if Jesus was right in what he had said about Peter's denials, maybe he was also trustworthy in what he had said about being raised from the dead.

It's important to note that what we have in today's text is a story about the discovery that the tomb was empty, and an explanation from the angelic messengers about why it was empty. This is just the beginning of Luke's final chapter. So far, the empty tomb alone doesn't lead to Easter faith among the apostles. What leads to Easter faith are the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, as his followers have personal encounters with the risen Lord, such as those that follow in the rest of Luke.

We can't travel back in time to examine the empty tomb for ourselves. But we shouldn't be surprised if we're left wondering or working through some perplexity of our own about the resurrection and its impact on our lives. True, we're here again today to proclaim that Christ is risen. But we're always discovering and grasping more of what his risenness means for us and for the life of the world. That's because Easter faith is no box that we simply check off in a list of religious affirmations. Easter faith is an ongoing encounter and engagement with the living Lord. When the angelic messengers tell the women, "He is not here," we ourselves are indirectly being told, "He is here," in a fuller and even more expansive sense. We discover that through our own experience of his presence and power in our lives, our own personal times, moments, events, and relationships where the risen Jesus comes to us and meets us.

So it is here this morning in our worship gathering. Strictly speaking, Easter is a once-a-year event. Yet in another sense every Sunday, every Lord's Day is a "little Easter," a worshipful celebration of the resurrection, the dawn of the new creation. And we the church are the community of the new creation, sent to proclaim and practice the reality that God in Christ is making all things new.

That "newness," though, is a disruptive and challenging thing. It requires that we open our lives up to the kind of transformation that comes with faith in Christ. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg once said, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."<sup>3</sup> Responding to the declaration, "Christ is risen!," with your own "He is risen indeed!," is one thing. But having that sink into your attitudes and actions is another.

Pastor and Author William Willimon was once asked by a skeptical friend, "Why do you need a supernaturally resurrected body of Jesus to make your faith work?" Willimon replied:

I don't *need* a resurrected Jesus. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I *want* a resurrected Jesus. In fact, [in one sense] a resurrected Jesus is a real nuisance for me, personally. I've got a good life, I've figured out how to work the world, on the whole, to the advantage of me and my friends and family. My health is good, and everybody close to me is doing fine. I have the illusion that I'm in control, that I'm making a so significant contribution to help Jesus ... on my

own. No, I don't *need* a bodily resurrected Jesus. In fact, [once I truly embrace the resurrection of Jesus], my life would become much more difficult.

[So] when the possibility of resurrection really comes through to you, when the rumor that something's afoot becomes a reality for you, well, you can see why the women [in the Gospel stories] were scared that first Easter.<sup>4</sup>

As I said, the resurrection is a disruptive and challenging thing. It threatens the status quo in our lives, in our church, and in the world. Things that seem unchangeable, in ourselves and in others. Social injustices and community problems that seem irreversible. Relationships that seem beyond repair. Corrupt institutions that seem impervious to reform. Whenever it looks like death and decay are permanent, the resurrection of Jesus breaks through and creates possibilities in places where we have abandoned all hope.

Tim Keller tells a story about the power of Christ's resurrection. He says:

A minister was in Italy, and there he saw the grave of a man who had died centuries before who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but a little afraid of it too. So the man had a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead in case there is a resurrection from the dead. He had insignias put all over the slab saying, "I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don't believe in it." Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave. So a hundred years later the acorn had grown up through the grave and split that slab. It was now a tall towering oak tree. The minister looked at it and asked, "If an acorn, which has the power of biological life in it, can split a slab of that magnitude, what can the acorn of God's resurrection power do in a person's life?"<sup>5</sup>

In your life. In my life. In the life of our church. But this requires that we let the reality of Easter sink deeper into us. So when we leave this service of worship today, we need to be like Peter as he walked away from the empty tomb. We need to know that something has happened. Something that we can't fully wrap our heads around. Something that becomes more clear to us as we encounter and experience the risen Jesus in our lives.

Eugene Peterson says of those who came to the empty tomb, "Reality was turning somersaults on them. Nothing was nailed down. They were in the middle of a mystery."<sup>6</sup> Though we're here today to once again declare, without hesitation, that Jesus is risen, we too are still living deeper into that mystery and growing into the power of the resurrection. That same power is what sustains us in our faith. It's what enables us to believe that Christ was bodily raised, and that God will do the same for all whose hope is in him.

With that kind of hope in our hearts, we live forward, knowing that "when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Thanks be to God that what he has promised for the future is already working its way back into our lives here in the present. So we can finish today's trip to the empty tomb, this Sunday morning encounter with the mystery of Christ risen, and let the truth of Easter sink in even more. Just how much it is sinking in will be revealed by how we practice the resurrection, showing by our lives that Jesus lives.

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<sup>1</sup> William D. Barrick, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 35, No. 2.

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

<sup>3</sup> Pannenberg is quoted in a conversation with *Prism* magazine.

<sup>4</sup> *The Collected Sermons of William Willimon* (Louisville: John Knox, 2010) 242.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Keller, "Knowing the Power of His Resurrection." In *Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross: Experiencing the Passion and Power of Easter*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009) 136.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene H. Peterson. *On Living Well: Brief Reflections on Wisdom for Walking in the Way of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2021) Kindle Edition.