

WHY DO YOU SEEK THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD?

Luke 24:1-12

The Resurrection of Our Lord (Series C)

April 21, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for The Resurrection of Our Lord comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 24, verses 1 through 12. It is on page 748 of the pew Bible. It continues the story of the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, watched as he was crucified, and then followed to the tomb to see where he was laid. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 24, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." ⁸ And they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, ¹¹ but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

But let's back up a few hours. Jesus is dead. Life will never be the same. These women had followed Jesus from Galilee on his journey to Jerusalem. This journey goes all the way back to chapter 9 (v. 51). That's when Jesus set out for Jerusalem. The walk from Galilee to Jerusalem usually took just a few days, but Jesus took his time. He stopped several times along the way to heal people, cast out demons, preach sermons, and tell parables. It was more of a tour than a direct trip.

These women had been traveling with Jesus and the apostles and the rest of the disciples. They saw all of his marvelous signs and miracles. They heard Jesus preaching about his kingdom. They were there on Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem triumphantly and humbly. They felt the excitement of the coming Kingdom. But, all of the sudden, one night, in the middle of the night, Jesus is arrested, and by the next afternoon he is dead. This is not what anyone expected. Life will never be the same.

So what do you do? You had expected this man "to redeem Israel" (24:21). Now he's dead. So these women are performing what they probably consider to be their last act of devotion to their Lord. They are going to prepare his body for burial.

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On Friday afternoon they stood at a distance watching as he breathed his last. Then, shortly before sundown, they saw Joseph of Arimathea take the body down from the cross and wrap it in a linen shroud. They followed Joseph as he carried the dead Jesus and laid him in the tomb. They witnessed the whole thing. They were certain of this: Jesus was dead. This is not what they had expected.

So now, on early Sunday morning, they were going to the tomb with spices. The common burial practice at the time was first to wrap the body in layers of cloth with lots of aromatic spices. The purpose of the spices was to manage the smell while the body decomposed. Then, after the flesh decomposed, they would take the bones and put them in a bone box that only needed to be as long as the upper leg bone. It was a more space-efficient way of burying people.

So the women were going to the tomb with spices to finish the first step. Joseph wrapped him in cloths on Friday, but they didn't have any spices that day. Jesus' death was rather sudden. They weren't ready for it. With his death occurring on the Passover, and with the Sabbath immediately following the next day, none of the merchants were open to buy spices from. So the body had to sit there all day on the Sabbath, until they could buy spices and go to the tomb early on Sunday morning.

This, they must have thought, was their last act of devotion to their Lord. And then what? I don't know. I suppose, go back to Galilee and see what's left of your life. But it's never going to be the same.

But they don't find the tomb the way it was on Friday afternoon. They find that the stone is not where they last saw it. It's still there, but rolled away. And they find that the body is not where they last saw it. In fact, they have no idea where the body is. It's gone! Then two men in dazzling apparel appeared. Matthew confirms what we suspect. These men are angels (Matt. 28:2-3). And they ask the women a goofy question, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (24:5).

Imagine visiting the grave of someone you love. But you get there and the grave is dug up. At first you're probably angry. *Someone has desecrated the grave!* What a horrible thing to do. Then someone appears to you and asks, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" This is getting kind of weird, right?

Taken at face value, without considering the context or the implications too much, this kind of seems like a condescending question. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" *What are you doing here? Don't you know you're looking in the wrong place?*

It's about on the same level as something a parent might say to a child, when that child is supposed to be getting ready for bed, but you find the child in the kitchen instead: "Why do you seek your toothbrush in the refrigerator?"

Likewise, the angels to the women: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" *Why would you expect to find Jesus here? This is where dead people are stored. There are many places where the living might be found, but a tomb is nowhere near the top of that list. Jesus has no business in a place for dead people.*

But the question isn't really condescending. If there's any hint of a rebuke in it, it's minor. "He is not here, but has risen" (24:6).

Then the men go on to remind them why they shouldn't be looking here: "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of men and be crucified and on the third day rise" (24:6-7; cf. 9:21-22, 43-45; 18:31-34).

Then the women remembered. Yes, Jesus had said this to them. It didn't make much sense at the time. Everyone thought it was a really bad idea, and they couldn't understand why Jesus was

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talking about it. But now they remember and understand. Yes, this is exactly what he said would happen. *Of course we wouldn't find him in the tomb. He said he would rise on the third day!* Jesus is alive! Life will never be the same.

So the women go to tell the apostles and the rest of the disciples this great news. But the apostles don't believe them. "These words seemed to them an idle tale" (24:11). Peter seems to sort of believe, enough to go and investigate. He sees the empty tomb, as well as the linen cloths that had been wrapped around Jesus' dead body. "And he went home marveling at what had happened" (24:12). He's not quite convinced yet. He needs to think through this.

That's where the reading for today ends. We don't actually see Jesus yet. But the Gospel of Luke keeps going, and it records some of the eyewitness encounters, as do the other gospels. We'll get to some of those later this Easter season. So we'll stick to this text for this morning. The angel reported the facts of what happened, and the women remember what Jesus had said, and they believe, but the apostles and the other disciples aren't quite there yet.

I find the details of this passage to be fascinating. Some of them are marks of authenticity, and I want to point them out to you. As Christians, everything we believe hinges on the historicity of this event. Our entire faith depends on whether or not Jesus actually rose from the dead. If he did, then it is very reasonable to believe that he is the Son of God and to believe all the things he taught, as well as the writings of his prophets and apostles. But, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then all of this is a hoax, and we're wasting our time with this whole Christianity thing (1 Cor. 15:17). So the historical details surrounding Jesus' resurrection are extremely important to us.

Now if I'm not careful, this could very easily turn into a historical lecture instead of a sermon. So I'm going to limit myself to the details in this text. There is much more that could be said concerning the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. And what I'm going to give you this morning is nowhere near a complete defense. Consider this to be just a few nuggets. You'll probably hear a few more during the rest of this season. This morning I'll limit it to just three basic elements.

First, the names. Luke names the eyewitnesses: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the Mother of James. He also mentions Peter, but Peter hasn't become an eyewitness yet. And there are several more eyewitnesses who will be named in other passages. The point is that the story of Jesus' resurrection did not circulate as anonymous reports. From the very beginning, there were names attached to it. And they weren't just generic names. Instead of simply saying, "Some lady; let's call her Mary," he identifies which Mary: Mary Magdalene. And instead of simply saying, "Some other lady named Mary," he identifies which Mary: Mary the mother of James. It's like citing sources in the newspaper. A reporter could just make up some marvelous story citing anonymous sources. It could go viral, get lots of shares on Facebook, but it wouldn't be credible. This is the whole problem we're having these days with fake news. You need to cite sources. You need to have real names attached to a story. And that's what we have with the story of Jesus' resurrection. We have real names attached to it. If you're a Jew in the first century, and you hear this story about Jesus rising from the dead, you can go and find one of these women and ask them about it.

It's also significant that there is more than one Mary. Mary was the most common female name at the time, so this matches up well historically. And think about this: if you're writing fiction, you don't use the same name for multiple people. It confuses your readers. The only reason you would have two of these three women named Mary is if they are real people and their

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names are actually Mary. You don't make it up this way. But, if this is the way it really happened, this is how you report it. So the names are the first mark of authenticity.

It's also significant that the first eyewitnesses were women. This is another mark of authenticity. In that culture a woman's testimony was not considered to be as credible as a man's testimony. Now, please don't misunderstand me. I don't agree with this evaluation. And Luke, the writer of this Gospel, doesn't seem to agree with it either. We all have the same eyeballs, and our brains are all capable of processing the same data. Today, male and female testimony have the same legal weight, and this is right. Two thousand years ago, however, it wasn't equal. A woman's testimony had about half the weight of a man's testimony. So it's actually a mark of authenticity that the first eyewitnesses were women. And this occurs in all four of the gospels. The first eyewitnesses were women. If you're making up this story, and you want people in the ancient world to believe it, you would put men at the empty tomb. But that's not how the gospel writers present it. It's the women first. And the only reason they would do it this way, is if that's how it actually happened. This is the second mark of authenticity.

And then we see this embarrassing attitude emerge when the women try to tell the apostles about Jesus' resurrection. The apostles don't believe them. They consider it an "idle tale" (24:11). This is the third mark of authenticity. Historians talk about the "criteria of embarrassment" when they're evaluating ancient sources. If an author paints himself or other significant figures in a purely positive light, we might question the honesty of the account. But when the author includes negative details of himself or the heroes of his story, then he's probably just telling it how it is. And it's not just that Luke portrays the apostles in a negative light, but it's these very apostles who end up being the primary witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, and they paint themselves in a negative light.

No doubt, the women tell the apostles of what the angel had reminded them of: that Jesus had told them that he "must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." But they either don't remember, or, more likely, they just don't believe it. The apostles—the men who will become preachers of this gospel—don't believe it when they hear it. If you're making this story up, you would probably say, "Oh, but we knew it all along." But that's not what they do. They paint themselves in a negative light, because that's how it happened.

So remember these three marks of authenticity: the names of the eyewitnesses, the fact that the first eyewitnesses were all women, and the embarrassing detail that Jesus' own apostles didn't even believe it. There's a lot more that could be said, so take these as just a few nuggets.

The historicity of Jesus' resurrection matters, because the entire Christian faith hinges on whether or not this event really happened. If it didn't happen, then "[our] faith is futile and [we] are still in our sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). But if it did actually happen, as the eyewitnesses testify, then we have three major benefits.

First, it proves that Jesus is the Son of God, just as he claimed to be. So we believe his words and the words of his apostles and prophets. We trust what God has spoken to us. Jesus is the Son of God, and our faith has a firm foundation.

The second benefit is this: we know that our sins are forgiven. God had laid upon Christ the full number of all our sins. Jesus suffered the wrath of God for those sins. Jesus paid for our sins "with His holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death." The resurrection does not forgive our sins. Christ's death accomplished that. The crucifixion was sufficient. But how do we know it worked? How do we know that the wrath of God was truly satisfied? We

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know because God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection is the vindication of Jesus Christ and the proof that his sacrifice was acceptable to God the Father. We know from the resurrection that our sins are forgiven.

And the third benefit is this: we will also be raised from the dead. Our God and Savior has been there. He has died. He has been to the grave. But the grave could not hold him. Jesus exercises authority over death, and he has promised that the grave will not hold his believing saints forever. At his return he will call to life those who have fallen asleep in him. Some will remain alive until that day. Others will be in the grave. But at his coming, we shall all be changed. This is what we heard in the epistle lesson. “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.” (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

Imagine you’re standing in front of the grave of a loved one who fell asleep in Jesus Christ. But it’s all dug up, and the coffin is open. The body isn’t where it’s supposed to be. Or maybe it’s exactly where it’s supposed to be. You look, and there beside you is your mother, father, husband, wife, son, or daughter, not dead, but living, not in their grave, but standing above it. And you look and realize that you are standing above your grave. And all around the cemetery people are standing above their graves. This would obviously be the most marvelous sight you had ever seen. Except there is something more marvelous yet. You behold your living Savior, Jesus Christ, for he has called his believing saints out of sin and death forever and transformed us into his perfect image.

Dear saints, this is our sure and certain hope. It is sure and certain because it is guaranteed by Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead. He has been to death, he has passed through it, and he will lead his believing saints through it as well.

The men at the tomb asked the women, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Jesus was not there, and he had no business being in a place for dead people. But he will return to the place of the dead, not to join the dead again, because he has already done that, but to bring his dead out of death. Jesus still has unfinished business with the grave: to call his redeemed out of it forever. Life will never be the same. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)