

Remember His Words

Luke 24: 1-12

It was very early in the morning, still dark. The women were up and had been up for an hour or more. The men were asleep. Peter was sleeping fitfully as fears of a sudden appearance by the Temple guard to take him away kept churning through his thoughts.

Mary gives him a shake, and he jumps like a rabbit. She tells him that the women are going to the tomb. “Huh? What? The tomb? Oh, the tomb.” As the mental cobwebs start to clear, he moves from fear reaction to security strategy. ‘Remember to make sure no one follows you, coming or going, okay?’ She gives him that look that says, “Duh.”

While the women head off to the tomb, we can imagine that Peter can’t get back to sleep. The thought of the Temple guard suddenly bursting through the door won’t stop running through his head. Fortunately, before they left, the women put on the Mr. Coffee for the men, and now the smell was *awesome*.

We know the women’s story: how they get to the tomb, the stone is somehow rolled away – no small feat in itself – *and there’s no body of Jesus inside*. Two angels put in an appearance to ask: *Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen!* It all comes back to them now, how Jesus had taught them about what would happen.

They rush back to where the disciples were hiding out. While we only remember three in the Luke account, *Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, mother of James*, Luke also adds the words: *and the others with them* which echoes what Mark had in his gospel account. Then figure that we have at least five women who went to the tomb, had this experience, figure it out, and return to tell the disciples. At least five women.

When they return and (we can imagine) excitedly make their report to the men, what does it say happened? *They did not believe the women because their words seemed like nonsense*. That’s rather harsh. The New Revised Standard Version is a bit different, that their words seemed like *an idle tale*.

We can imagine the men scoffing and mocking the women and their account of the stone rolled away, an empty tomb, the appearance of angels, and their message, *He is risen!* “Yeah, right!” “Have you lost your minds?” “What garbage!”

But amid the scoffing and hooting and laughter, something awakened in Peter. Having been obsessed with security concerns and trying to stay one step ahead of the powers-that-be, Peter had not taken any time to reflect on Jesus’ teachings together with the events that had unfolded. As one of the women mentioned, ‘Remember how he told us,’ Peter’s memory kicks into high gear and the connections start to sizzle in his mind. He springs up and runs to the tomb with his mind running as fast it can, just like his legs, trying to make sense of all this new information.

Linen strips, that would have wrapped the body, lie on the bier inside the tomb, and there is no corpse. The text says, *He went away, wondering to himself what had happened.*

Peter departs from the place, trying to come to terms with this empty tomb. Is it an idle tale that the women have spun? Is it some miraculous event? And if so, what does it mean? Peter is wrestling with this turn of events, struggling to make sense of things, *if* “sense” is even supposed to be made of this.

What does this Easter morning mean? That’s the question that draws us together every spring: what **does** this mean: Easter, resurrection, new life out of death?

We are told that the resurrection is about life after death, being saved from judgment, gaining the grace of God and a heavenly reward. There is one huge problem though. None of the gospels accounts have Jesus saying anything really about resurrection and heavenly reward or most of the rest. So how is it that our tradition has transferred the idea of the resurrection of Jesus into some heavenly reward and afterlife?

Frankly, even our notions of this afterlife are pretty scandalous in their speculations. People think the next life will be *better* than this life. Really? It’s going to be better than sitting in your spacious house with its climate controlled environment, snuggled into a recliner, with popcorn and a beer, watching your favorite entertainment, remote control at the ready, until the pizza guy comes with your order. Heaven is going to be better than that? Really? Or is it just more of what we really like, and having it all the time? Then heaven is simply our own fantasy of self-indulgence in the extreme. Jesus died so that we could dwell in **self-indulgence for eternity.**

Maybe, just maybe, we missed something, screwed up something in this resurrection story. Did we forget about Palm Sunday, the ride into Jerusalem, the journey into the heart of the cherished and revered faith tradition, the center of power and wealth, the challenge to the status quo, the almost certain arrest and persecution? John the Baptist never even marched into Jerusalem and they got rid of him easily enough.

Did we forget the plotting against his life by the Powers-that-be while he taught in the Temple? Did we forget his arrest in the middle of the night by the Temple guard? Did we forget his abuse and torture? Did we forget his rejection by the crowds, the masses? Did we forget Roman Governor Pilate’s indifference that sentenced him to death? Did we forget the cross, the crucifixion, the ghastly hanging for hours upon hours until finally his shoulders collapse into his windpipe and he suffocates in a horrible death?

The real story, lost amid the lilies and the egg hunts, the happy talk and the alleluias, is that Jesus stood up and stood firm with compassion as his motivation, with justice in his backbone, with love for the weak, poor, and vulnerable in his heart. His

hands touched and healed and comforted the ones not one of us would go near, the outcast, condemned, and lost. Anchored in the unbending courage of faith, his voice spoke out for the voiceless, coming at the powerful in ways that shook them to their core.

He was executed for sedition, for treason against the state, for invoking God and the power of faith in ways that were unacceptable to the religious elite and leadership. They had him arrested, and the Empire ended his campaign for justice and peace, his ministry of healing and grace, his teaching of love and compassion. Death would take him down and shut him up. Then everyone could go back to their recliner and their remote, their popcorn and beer, their very comfortable existence. With the death of Jesus, the disrupter of law and order, we settle back to the way things were. That's what we want; when all is good for me and I am happy, and happily blind, deaf, and indifferent to what is tragic and oppressive for others.

The empty tomb of the resurrection morning is God's answer to the Empire; you can't kill the power of faith or the good news of the faithful Son. Resolute in faith in God and trusting in the promise of life, the servant of the Lord and his Kingdom has nothing to fear from the Empire or any other power on earth. There is resurrection *power* in faith in Jesus and his path.

The resurrection is God's word to faithful servants ministering for the Kingdom. God says you are free, liberated from fear, triumphant even over death. You are empowered to be witnesses to new life, to be challengers of the powers, to stand for justice, grace, and peace, to embrace the sinful, lift up the poor and exploited, and demand love and compassion from a sinful world that treats people like garbage and disposes of them in the same way. You are empowered to serve the Kingdom **like Jesus**.

That fact is a huge, steaming bowl of *I-don't-want-that!* for most believers. Give us the lilies, the alleluias, and the eggs, give us life after death, but **don't** tell me I'm supposed to be just like Jesus!

The resurrection is God's power waiting to happen in those who declare Jesus Lord and Savior. It isn't an individual salve for trivial personal faults and foibles that we quaintly label "sins." Rather, it is your authorization to work, to take the road less traveled, the one that leads into threats, danger, and evil, and even to sacrifice yourself for the sake of the Kingdom.

There is only one problem, of course. Like I said, no one wants that authority; no one wants to do that service – not even close. We like our Easter, our life after death, our heaven that consists of my butt in an eternal recliner and my hand on the remote for eternity.

But for a moment, just a moment, let's understand one thing: Jesus' resurrection was not about life after death or so you could go to heaven. Just for a moment, let's imagine that the resurrection was actually something important, something to change

the world, something to bring new heavens and earth as the prophet Isaiah described. Then we will understand why we sing, Alleluia! Praise the Lord! For it is the new life empowerment that we are given in *this* life that leads us into the promise of new life in the Kingdom today. That is, that we should follow Jesus **all** the way.