

“The Empty Tomb”
Luke 24.1-12
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April 4, 2021
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When we gathered in the sanctuary on Thursday evening, we heard the story of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, his betrayal by Judas, then his arrest, trial and crucifixion. The dark cloth we placed on the cross Thursday symbolized his death. Holy Week is the story full of drama - within a matter of days Jesus who was hailed as a Messiah by the crowds on Palm Sunday finds himself suffering a death fit for criminals. On noon on Good Friday the sky turns dark, and Jesus cries “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!” and then he breathes his last breath (23.46). We are told that everyone who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance observing his death. A good and righteous man named Joseph of Arimathea takes Jesus’ dead body down from the cross, wraps it in linen cloth and lays it in a tomb carved out of the rock, in which no one had ever been buried. We are told that women who had come with Jesus from Galilee follow Joseph. They see Joseph placing the body inside, and then they go away to prepare fragrant spices and perfumed oils for his proper burial. Because the Sabbath was beginning they went home to rest. And the story picks up with these verses in Luke 24, beginning with verse 1:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

As you can tell it is the women from Galilee who are front and center in Luke’s Easter story of the resurrection. We have been told about these women since chapter 8.1-3 - close companions of Jesus who travel with him and the other disciples. It’s clear that these women are faithfully doing what needs to be done - they know Jesus’ body must have a proper burial, and they know they must wait til the sabbath is over before they go to the tomb. While others deny Jesus or flee, these women stand firm... and they come to the foreground as the first witnesses to the resurrection (Gonzalez, [Luke: Belief, A Theological Commentary](#); 5093 kindle). But before we get ahead of ourselves we must name that everyone, including the women, really believe that Jesus is really dead. They saw him breathe his last, they saw Joseph place him in the cave, so they know he really is gone. As [one commentator](#) on this passage has said, “Bodies that are dead presumably remain dead. The best one can do is to treat them with respect.” And that is what the women intend to do. They are coming to

the tomb out of a sense of faithfulness, doing the necessary thing, not because they expect a miracle but because it's the right thing for them to do! And what a surprise when they discover the stone has been rolled away, and when they go inside they do not find Jesus' body. This revelation - the empty tomb - does not lead them to faith - in fact we are told that they are quite perplexed. No, before they can have faith, they need some help, they need some interpretation (Luke Timothy Johnson, The Gospel of Luke, p. 387) And lo and behold, do they receive some interpretive help! Two men in dazzling clothes appear beside them - reminiscent of the dazzling images of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration, these angelic figures bring the message of Easter to the women: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you in Galilee that the Son of Man must be handed over and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." It is only after this interpretation, this invitation to remember, that the women are able to believe the good news. These women who become the first witnesses to the mystery of Easter are moved not by proof - remember, they actually do not see Jesus - they are not convinced by logic or a long detailed scientific explanation - no, they are simply told to remember the words of Jesus, and they do! And this encounter at the empty tomb is enough to send them enthusiastically running to tell the 11 disciples and to all the rest of Jesus' followers.

Just like the shepherds who in response to the angels run to Bethlehem, announcing the good news of Jesus' birth (2.15-16), the women become the first heralds of Easter! Luke goes to great length to name them: it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women - it's as if Luke wants to record their names as a way of giving them extra credibility. These were the ones who had been with Jesus all along, they were not just some bandwagon fans.

In a fairy book this would make a great ending - the women go and tell the others who all believe, right?! Well, as you know by now, this is not how the story unfolds. Instead, the disciples do not believe their testimony - we are told their words seemed to them like an idle tale (24.11) - like complete nonsense. The Greek word used here for idle tale is quite condescending in tone, as it is the root of the English word for delirious (Johnson, p. 388). With an air of superiority the disciples dismiss the women's response as total nonsense. The only one who went to check it out for himself is Peter, and when he sees the empty tomb for himself he is amazed - but there's no mention of him coming to faith. Neither does he tell the others about what he saw - and when Jesus appears to the 11 later in the chapter, showing them his hands and feet, they still have doubts and are not ready to believe (24.40-41). Biblical scholar Justo Gonzalez makes the case that the contrast between the women and the men disciples is clearly purposeful, meaning that "Luke is stressing the faith of these women who have traveled with Jesus from Galilee, and who were the only ones who remain true throughout the entire story of the betrayal. Even though church history, with its expectation of entirely male leadership, would lead us to think otherwise, it is [the women] who bring the message of the resurrection to the 11 and not vice versa" (Gonzalez, 5101).

While the prominence of the women in the story is important, what is central to Easter is the reality of the resurrection. But how are we to understand this experience, those of us who are removed almost 2,000 years later? ***What I want to suggest this morning is that the experience of the women who came to the tomb is very similar to the experience we all have.*** Another New Testament scholar ([Craig Coester](#)) puts it like this: "The women receive a word that runs counter to what they know to be true. 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen' (24:5)... What is most striking is that the women do not see the risen Jesus himself. Instead, all they have is a word, a message... They are told that Jesus has risen, but they do not see his body. ... It would seem so much easier to have the women come to the tomb and watch Jesus walk out into the

light of a new day.” But that’s not how it worked for them and that is not how it works for us either. On this Easter morning we don’t have surveillance camera recordings of what happened inside the tomb, and we don’t have scientific evidence of Jesus’ shroud or any other form of scientific proof. But what we do have is simply the testimony of the first witnesses, recorded in the scriptures and read aloud by your pastor - the story was acted out by our youth at the sunrise service, too. I wish I could offer you more, but this is what we have. Now, perhaps you can understand why the other disciples considered the women’s message to be delirium - total nonsense. It’s only logical to believe that dead bodies remain dead, and that is what reason tells us. It’s reasonable to believe what we know from our experience, and death certainly seems to have the last word. Or does it?

Blaise Pascal was a famous 17th century French philosopher and mathematician who had a mid-life conversion to Christianity. Pascal once wrote, ***“The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of...”*** In other words, we can know the truth not only by our reason and intellect, but also by the knowledge of the heart. When I first came across this quote I was in college, and it was a time I was questioning everything about my faith. In high school I had always lived in the certainty of my faith - everything was clearly black and white - but in college I met new people and discovered that the world was much bigger than my Southern Baptist faith perspective - these years were not easy for me - but the time of questioning and doubt became a time of intense spiritual growth. It was during this time of searching that I was first drawn to Pascal’s writings. Here was one of the most brilliant mathematicians of all time, and he was a Christian, too. Though I was trying to find certainty in my faith through my intellect, I was drawn to the notion that faith was not always about logic and proofs - that faith could also be based in the experience of the heart, a place that was not defined by the so called rules of logic.

At the core of the Christian faith is the Easter message that death does not have the last word, that when God raised Jesus from the dead the power of sin and death were broken - and that with the resurrection of Jesus, God is bringing about an altogether new reality, a new order (Gonzalez, 5110). This Easter message calls us from our old belief in death to a new belief in life. To make this leap of faith, to truly believe that God’s power of life is stronger than the power of death - this leap of faith won’t come by way of logic and rational steps. Though some people seek to prove the resurrections’ truth by way of rational proof, I am afraid when we do that we are missing the point. “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of...” The women had planned to do the logical thing that day - do their duty and honor their beloved friend who had died, and then return to their normal lives. Logic would dictate that Peter and the others should return to their boats, their old lives. ***But the heart of the matter is that the resurrection is a game changer, and it defies all logical categories.*** Later in Luke’s chapter Jesus will appear to two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, and though they don’t recognize Jesus at first, he opens the scriptures to them and then breaks bread with them. We are told, “Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus.” The disciples wonder, “Were not our hearts on fire when Jesus spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?” (24.32) I believe it is through these heart-felt and real experiences of the Risen Christ that enables us to believe in the resurrection, experiences that cannot be proven by logic but neither can they be denied.

During my time of questioning and doubting in college, I pushed myself to the edge of where my reason could take me - and it could only get me so far. But one night I had a personal experience of the Holy that I cannot to this day explain fully, so I won’t even try - but it’s something I have accepted by faith. We all have different paths to God and experience the holy in many ways - my experience is no standard. But through my experience I came to trust that God is as real as the

breath I breathe each second. I finally knew God's presence in a real and intimate way. Though I can still have times of questioning and doubt, wondering if God is really with me, this experience of the Holy is what anchors me in the faith.

You see, for the disciples it was not the persuasive power of the empty tomb that led them to faith, but rather it was a personal encounter with the risen Lord (NIB, Vol IX, p. 473). Such encounters with Jesus changed ordinary men like Peter and Thomas and Saul. And women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. And saints like Augustine and Theresa of Avila, Saint Francis and Mother Teresa. All of us who have been baptized into Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit, named and claimed as beloved children of God - we have all encountered the power of the Risen Christ. And when we come to the Lord's Table, like we will do in a few minutes, we are witnesses to the Lord's gracious and real presence - he offers us the bread of life, and the cup of salvation. And though the resurrection doesn't give an answer to questions about what life will be after death, such as: how will it be? how will it look? - the resurrection does show us that love is indeed stronger than death. Our faith thus invites us to remain silent, leaving the whys, wheres, hows, and whens behind, and simply trust in our hearts that nothing in life or in death can separate us from God's love (Henri Nouwen, Daily Meditation - April 2, 2021)

To God be the glory, now and always, Amen.