

Resurrection Joy
Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 24: 1-12
March 31, 2013 (Easter)
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I Introduction

A couple of years ago, we were in the UK and had the chance to visit Bath and look at the amazing Roman Ruins there and marvel at the incredibly sophisticated engineering that was involved in that construction with heated floors and piping taking the water to all different places of the city. It was just an amazing thing, and at the outskirts of the Roman Empire. That impressed on me, as happens periodically, how incredibly sophisticated the ancients were. They didn't have our scientific understanding, but when you look at what was accomplished in the ancient world in terms of the sophistication of their laws and philosophy and mathematical understandings and art and architecture, all of which have shaped us, it's quite an astounding thing. It is an important thing to keep in mind on a day like today when we talk about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because it strikes me that often we assume that it was easier for the disciples and for the early church to accept the event of the resurrection than it is for us. That somehow, they had a more primitive worldview and could absorb that idea more readily than we can. And I think that's wrong. I think that they had exactly the same struggle that we have, and the Apostle Paul is very clear that the idea of a bodily resurrection was as counterintuitive and illogical and even offensive to that world as it is often in our world.

When we gather together on Easter and we celebrate in this glorious space and celebrate with the wonderful music, the elephant in the room is always this awkward

question about the reality of a physical resurrection. We've all seen the stories and articles about whether or not it was an elaborate hoax, perhaps generated by the disciples, perhaps by Jesus himself. We've heard all of the conversation about whether it was all a metaphor symbolizing the growth and the new life that bursts forth from the dead and barren ground every spring. We wonder if it's a story that people need to hear because we fear death so much and just need to know that there's something on the other side of that.

I think that we're all here today: the regular churchgoers, the occasional churchgoers, maybe the new church comers, because we're all wrestling with this question. We want to believe on some level but are not always quite sure how. We experience the draw of this powerful story, but also recognize that in many ways, it's also a disturbing one, causes us some discomfort. Which is why this gospel lesson that we heard this morning is such a wonderful one to unpack as we gather on this Easter Sunday.

II. Empty Tomb

It's a story that begins with the women, who were part of the body of disciples and had been accompanying Jesus, having gathered the spices to go and anoint and prepare His body for final burial. It had been rushed on Friday because there wasn't time before the sun went down to do it properly, so they go back to do it properly. And I will just say here parenthetically, it's very helpful to note that in a society that was as male dominated as that society was, it's important to note the really critical role played by women throughout the gospel narrative, a very powerful statement about the

importance of women in leadership in the early church. These women are the apostles to the apostles.

So, the women come to the tomb and they find it empty, and these two angels who tell them He has risen just like He said He was going to. They don't know exactly what to do with this, but they run back to tell the apostles and the other disciples who don't believe them because, of course, they're women and the apostles are men. And so, Peter gets up and runs down to the tomb to check it out for himself, and to find the empty clothes lying there, and he goes home amazed.

That story is a powerful metaphor for where all of us are, I think, much of the time with this story. The disciples knew something happened, that the body was gone, and likewise, we know something happened. We know that something happened that transformed this insignificant, frightened, little group of fishermen into a force that transformed the known world and changed the course of all of history. We know that they encountered what they felt was the Risen Christ and this experience of the Risen Christ changed everything. That piece is a historical fact.

But I think we often wondered whether if we had had that same experience, we would have understood it in the same way. Which is why Peter is such a wonderful model for us this morning, because I think Peter models for us how we start to engage this process of our own doubt in the face of this miraculous event.

The first thing Peter does is that he goes to visit the tomb. We are all on a spiritual quest. We are all seeking to fill that place in our lives that longs for the divine.

But again, it's simultaneously what we long for at our deepest level and also what is most difficult for us, because it can involve our needing to change, it can involve our

life going in a direction that we had not planned. And so, we are simultaneously drawn to and fearful of this encounter. And I think that one of the ways that we deal with that is we keep ourselves so busy that we don't have time to do the looking. Peter reminds us that we've got to engage in the quest, we've got to get out, get up from where we are, get out of our comfort place and go seeking the one who is calling us.

The second thing Peter does is that he goes to the tomb and he pays attention to what he sees. He sees the empty clothes sitting in the tomb and then tries to figure out what that is about. Peter pays attention to what's going on around him. And it strikes me periodically that we often don't pay attention to what's going on around us and we discount our own experience and the validity of it. I talk to people all the time who say, "I have never had any experience of God, and I don't know what to look for there." Well, I want to suggest that God is seeking to encounter each of us all the time and maybe we need to look at our own experience with a different set of eyes.

Part of our struggle is that we discount the experiences that we have had. Where are the places where you have felt maybe just a hint of the divine? Where are the places that you see new life springing forth in an almost miraculous way to open up new possibilities?

Just this week, our new pope was talking about the central role of women in the church, picking up on the idea that Luke was trying to share 2000 years ago, but we're men and sometimes it takes us a while to figure it out, right? Organized labor and business coming together to hammer out the beginnings of an understanding of a healthy immigration policy. New life coming forth. Where have you heard people talking about their experience of God with conviction and authenticity?

And then, Peter walks away from the tomb in amazement. It often strikes me that we have lost our ability to be amazed. That it's so easy in our culture to fall into patterns of cynicism: cynicism about our political leaders and the political process, cynicism about the church, cynicism about every piece of our national life and there are some good reasons to be cynical. There's a lot to be cynical about. But the danger there is that cynicism has a tendency to crush our ability to be amazed, to see the amazing things happening around us and to celebrate that. We feel vulnerable, and cynicism is just a safe way to keep that at a distance. It's a safe way to feel smug and superior and disengaged from a world in which wondrous things are happening all the time. And so, we seek then to fill that hole in our souls in all kinds of other ways. We buy things, we engage in addictive behaviors, we seek after power and prestige, and all the time, the angels are saying to us, "Why are you seeking the living among the dead? He is risen."

III. Following Peter

So, Peter asks us if we are seeking an encounter with a God who desperately wants to encounter us. How are we creating the space for that encounter to happen? How do you create the space where you have the opportunity to meet the Risen Christ? Can you find the places to create quiet space for contemplation and meditation that is the place you first encountered the Risen Christ? You take the time to meet Christ in the place that Christ told us He would be, which is among the marginalized and the poor and the homeless. That was also a place where I found my life transformed by the Risen Christ. Can you meet Christ in that sacred space as you sit beside the deathbed

of a loved one and bring closure to that journey? Can you experience the power of the Risen Christ in transformative worship and in art? Where are you taking the time? Where are you creating the space where you can listen for the voice of God? It's easy to say other people have those experiences, or maybe, those experiences are just illusory. But until you take the time and create the space, we don't give God the opportunity to engage us, and the Risen Christ is waiting for us.

IV. Conclusion

In Bible study on Wednesday this week, one of our members asked, "Why couldn't Jesus just appear physically once in a while and make the whole process easier?" That's a good question. And as I ponder that this week, I got to thinking, if I got out of the pulpit and Jesus Christ descended down and started speaking to us, how would that make a difference? Because in my heart of hearts, I think a lot of you would walk out of the church and go, "Wow. That was cool. How did Charlie rig that?" Right? Or even if we believed it was Jesus, we would walk away saying, "That was amazing, but I'm not sure He understands all of the complexities of my life." Right? Or, "I wonder if He's thought through some of those ideas thoroughly, because they're not quite working for me." See, I'm not sure if the Risen Christ appeared to us here and now, we would respond any differently than we do. Which is to say, I think, that the empty tomb is an invitation, it is an invitation for us to engage in a journey that will transform our lives. It is an invitation to seek the one who so passionately desires us, and to live the kind of life that we heard the Prophet Isaiah talk about on that holy mountain. It is the invitation to a life of promise and of joy. How will you respond?

Amen.