

He is Not Here; He Has Risen

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

April 21, 2019

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Luke 24:1-12

“They did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense.”

This is an ongoing problem when it comes to Easter. Our whole life we've been trained in suspicion; we've been trained to be little bit disbelieving. And that's not all bad. I read somewhere this week that one-third of robocalls are now scams, and I believe it. Two weeks ago, when I came home from Spring break, I had two messages on my answering machine telling me, “We have reason to believe that your social security number has been accessed and your valuable personal information may now be at risk. Please call this number now!” You need to be a little suspicious to keep from being swept up in this nonsense. We're especially suspicious of really good news. Our whole life we've been told: “If something seems too good to be true, it probably is.” That attitude is engrained in us.

Now here comes the news of Easter morning and it is good news. The news doesn't get any better than this! Jesus is Alive! The grave is empty! The powers of evil have been defeated! Death has lost its hold on us and we will live forever! To the disciples, this news seemed too good to be true. So is it any wonder that the disciples don't believe the women. Is it so surprising that they treat their news like nonsense? By the same token, is it any wonder that more and more people today treat the Easter gospel as nonsense, as wishful thinking? Many modern people react just like the disciples to the news of Easter. There are lots of circles where, if you were to say that you believe that Jesus actually rose from the dead, they would look at you like you have a screw loose; like you claimed to see Bigfoot in Seidman Park. And if we are honest, their skepticism sometimes starts to infect our hearts.

Under the pressures of respectability many religious people have come up with a way of making the resurrection palatable again. They have changed the way they talk about the resurrection. They have shifted the resurrection from something that happened in reality on the outside, to something that happens on the inside in our heart. They don't talk about Jesus physically walking out of the tomb. When they talk about the resurrection, they talk about resurrection in the hearts and imaginations of Jesus' followers. Listen to these quotes from real Easter sermons and you will see what I mean: “The resurrection is the divine inspiration for us, giving us the strength and courage to imitate Jesus.” “Peter is a symbol of human weakness; his discovery of acceptance and forgiveness is personified in *the idea* of the risen Jesus.” “In their table fellowship after the crucifixion, the heartbroken disciples gradually *came to sense* that Jesus was still with them.” “The disciples *came to believe* that Jesus lives forever in the faith of those who trust his message.” Did the resurrection really happen? Did Jesus walk out of the tomb? That's not important, say these ministers, what really matters is what happened on the inside of the disciples. What really matters is that the resurrection happened in their imagination, in their heart.

I certainly agree that the resurrection ought to transform your heart and your imagination, but when you read the gospel of Luke, you find exactly the opposite of an inside resurrection. In Luke, the last place the resurrection happens is in the hearts and minds of disciples. In his account of the resurrection, Luke actually spends quite a lot of time talking about what is

happening on the inside of the disciples. Most of the time the gospels don't describe thoughts and feelings, but after the resurrection Luke gives us a peek into the hearts and minds of the disciples. But when we peek into those hearts and minds, we don't find anything like hope and confidence. When Luke shows you the inside of people, you don't see confidence, you see confusion and fear and disbelief! Jesus has to come and practically shake people to get them to believe.

Look at the different examples: Let's look at the inside reaction of the women. They are the first to accept the resurrection, but even for them it takes some time. When they come to the tomb, they're not thinking resurrection; they have death on their minds. They expect to embalm a body. When they get to the tomb and find no body, they're still not thinking resurrection, they are simply confused. And when the angels show up and say 'why are you seeking the living among the dead?' they're still not thinking resurrection, now they're afraid. It's not until the angels actually say that Jesus has risen and remind them that Jesus had predicted this day that the possibility of resurrection begins to grow in their hearts. The resurrection did not start inside them; it came from the outside and swept them away.

Let's look at the inside reaction of Cleopas and his friend on the Emmaus road, the story at the end of Luke 24. Cleopas and his companion aren't thinking resurrection, their faces are downcast. So little do they expect the resurrection that they walk for miles with Jesus without recognizing him. It's not until their eyes are opened for them (verse 31, their eyes *were opened*, a *passive verb*) that the resurrection begins to dawn on them. The resurrection didn't start inside them; it came from the outside and swept them away.

What about the inside reaction of the rest of the disciples? They're not thinking resurrection. They're the most hard-hearted, thick-headed of the bunch. The news of the empty grave seems to them like nonsense. Peter runs to see the empty tomb, but he does not believe, he only wonders what's going on. To combat their skepticism, Jesus makes a personal appearance – Luke 24:36. Surely that will make them believe! But even then they still aren't thinking resurrection, they are "startled and frightened thinking they have seen a ghost." So he shows them his hands and his feet, but as verse 41 says, they still don't believe it. Finally, to show them he's not a ghost, Jesus eats some solid food in front of them. And then in verse 45 Jesus himself opens their minds so that they could understand. The resurrection did not start inside the disciples; Jesus had to kick open the door of their hearts and minds. Fear and doubt, skepticism and disbelief, confusion and surprise; these are the inner emotions of the disciples. This is what rises in their hearts on Easter Sunday. This is not the story of a resurrection that begins in the hearts and imaginations of his followers. The last place this shows up is in the hearts and imaginations of the disciples! This is the story of a real event that happens in the real world that bursts into the lives of people who expect nothing.

Now at this point you may be expecting me to say, 'So, shame on all of you who doubt!' At this point you might expect me to wag my finger at anyone who has ever had a hard time accepting the resurrection and say 'shame on you!' Believe harder! If you don't have unwavering confidence in the resurrection you are in big trouble. Shame on you if you are one of those people who sometimes have trouble believing in a physical resurrection. But that's not, I think, the appropriate thing to do this morning, especially in light of Luke's gospel. Of course it is better if we believe. Of course it is better for us not to doubt and have strong faith. Of course it would be better if the hope of Easter filled us up from top to bottom. As Jesus said, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe! But if I were to call you to demand intellectual and emotional certainty this morning, I would be doing the same thing I accused those preachers of

doing at the beginning of the sermon. I would be making the resurrection about what's happening on your insides rather than what's happened on the outside. I'd be focusing on your subjective reaction, not on the objective reality of the empty tomb. If I were to say "believe harder" I'd make it sound like you have to make Easter happen for you. But that's not how it is. When it comes to our attitudes toward Easter we are just like the disciples that first Sunday. Our hearts and minds here this morning are all over the place. Many of us come here in belief. Many of us come in excitement and joy. But some of us are doubting. Some of us are afraid of the future. Most of us have low expectations for change in our lives and in the world. Some of us are just plain bored. Our internal states are all over the map. But your internal state makes absolutely no difference to the truth we proclaim today! Jesus is alive! Regardless of how you feel, Jesus is alive. You can deny it – he's still alive. You can ignore it – he's still alive. You can misunderstand it – he's still alive. Your discouragements and doubts have no power over the joyful truth of this day. There's something going on here that's way bigger than you and your moods.

I have a friend – let's call him Bob - who looks at the world in a very Christian Reformed way. That is to say, he's more analytical than emotional. He's got a healthy skepticism about some of the weird stuff in the church. He's not someone who gets swept up in trends. He likes a good orderly worship service. He likes to think things through. Bob used to live in Toronto and one day, back in the 90's, he and a friend decided to check out the Toronto Airport Vineyard church. This was a relatively famous charismatic church in the Toronto area known for miraculous goings on during the service, including something called the Toronto blessing. People who go to these services sometimes get laid out; slain in the Spirit; they physically fall over in ecstasy. This is not Bob's kind of church, but because it was famous, and because there was a buzz about it, a friend of Bob convinced him to go. Bob felt a little guilty about that. He thought you should be at church to worship, not to check out the weird stuff. But his friend convinced him and he went with low expectations. As Bob tells it, the first part of the service was all singing and preaching and none of it very good: C+ preaching, C- music is how he characterized it. After the singing, the leaders said that anyone who wanted could come forward to be prayed over. This was the part of the service where people would sometimes get laid out. Bob's friend said, "C'mon, let's go up to the front and have them pray over us." Bob didn't want to go because he felt like he wasn't doing it sincerely; he was just doing it out of curiosity, like some sort of research project. But his friend was very persuasive and managed to talk him into it. When Bob got up there a group got around him and began to pray for him. And somehow they seemed to know things about his life that they couldn't have known. They knew concerns he never told anyone. And in the middle of the prayer he says it was like someone grabbed the back of his legs and pulled, and before Bob knew what was happening he was on his back; a regular CRC guy slain in the Spirit.

There was no expectation here. There was no power of suggestion. This experience didn't start in his head. It came from the outside. It just burst upon him like the resurrection burst upon the women on Easter morning. Bob is the same person he's always been. He's still rational and analytical. He's not a charismatic. He's not at Pentecostal churches every week trying to recapture his experience. When you ask him what difference this experience means to him he says, "It taught me that this stuff is real."

The good news of Easter morning is not nonsense! This stuff is real. Christ is risen! Death is defeated. Christ is risen! The new creation has dawned. Christ is risen! The grave is

empty and Jesus is on the loose! He's at work in the world. He's at work in the church and he's at work in you. Let us go out from here and fill this world with our Alleluias.

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