

LUKE 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they 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.

"Moment of Truth"

The Resurrection of Our Lord - April 21, 2019 - Luke 24:1-12

Imagine that this morning happened a little differently than you originally planned. (Some of you young parents may not have had a plan, but play along with me for a moment.) Imagine that this morning, when you pulled into the parking lot, there were parking spaces available close to the sanctuary, but when you walked in you heard somber bells tolling in half light. You heard the reader detailing the last moments of Jesus' life, heard the book slammed as the closing of the tomb, and as a chill went up your spine, you saw the cross. What is going on here, you may have thought. Did I miss a meeting? Isn't this Easter?! Where are the lilies and the banners and the joy of our gathered community raising their voices in songs we all know? What has happened? This is Good Friday! This is **NOT** what I expected.

The story today is familiar. Some disciples of Jesus, apparently all women, have just experienced such a moment. But this is not the first time their lives had been changed forever. We can assume from the Bible that about three years before today's story, they each had a moment of clarity that was so true they just had to set everything aside and follow a man from Nazareth, a teacher of truth, a restorer of bodies and souls. A truth like that doesn't come along every day. But there it was. And there they were. They became followers, believers in Jesus.

It was hard, this job of wandering around from village to town - from Galilee and even farther north, all the way to Jerusalem in the south - but the relationships were almost enough to make it all worthwhile. Everyone counted. Everyone belonged. And Jesus was the reason their lives were now peppered with miraculous healings, amazing teaching, power over nature and evil, restoration and forgiveness. This made it worth the sacrifices. This made the cost seem inconsequential. Jesus made life worth something far greater than what they had invested in him. But now he was gone.

Add another experience that changed each of their lives, something that would take a toll on them forever. How could they go on without Jesus? How could they even begin to think that they might do the work he had done? What would they do now that he had left them, with no instructions, just what they had known before they knew him. Go - at the first safe opportunity - and anoint his body as was the custom of the Jews. It was mitzvah. It was a command. These women knew death, and they knew exactly what to expect, what to do and how to do it. They would prepare his earthly remains with great respect and great love.

But instead of finding themselves in Good Friday expecting Easter – these women who came to the tomb found themselves in Easter when they expected Good Friday! First, Jesus' tomb was open. Perhaps grateful that someone had provided access, they went inside to begin their work. Noooo, there was no body. Had he been moved? Did the women miss a message? Where was Jesus, they all wondered (Luke says they were “perplexed,” not afraid.) But it didn't take long for fear to grip them in the tomb of their missing Lord. Two men in dazzling clothing appeared there with them, and asked the question that would launch their third life-changing experience. *“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen!”* (Oh, thanks, we were wondering... Cue the Hallelujah Chorus.) But they continued, *“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.”* (Oh, yeah... come to think of it, he did say something like that – but we... didn't believe him - couldn't bear to believe him - couldn't imagine it would actually happen to him.) But with that reminder, they **did** remember, and went straight to the others to tell **them** what had happened.

Resurrection tends to rearrange everything. Belief systems. Schedules. Friendships. Rituals. Even lives. When the 11 heard the women's story, they had a similar reaction. *“This can't be... couldn't happen... too good to be true.”* But one among them believed enough to get up and run to the tomb. He saw nothing, either. But that meant that the testimony was true. Peter had just experienced his own personal moment of truth, like the women, for the third time since he met Jesus.

Why do we keep looking for life in graveyards? What prevents us from seeing the power of God at work in the world, or even in us? Are our hearts too much like stone that needs to be rolled away? Have we *never* seen God at work, so all we know is the despair of a lifeless tomb in desperate need of some Resurrection hope? Maybe you have felt that Jesus has left your life, that somehow you have lost God. Or struggled with the why? of tragedy as it unfolds right before you. Maybe you know someone who is really, really angry with God. Then, my friends, you have been to the tomb and looked inside. But the Risen Christ is waiting for you. Stop looking for the living among the dead! Don't fret, folks have failed to recognize the work of God before.

2000 years ago, skeptics claimed that the resurrection was just a story from people who had created a fantasy to cope with their grief. And yet, none of the gospels portray people acting that way. In fact, each of the early believers had their moments of truth – next week we'll hear about Thomas – who couldn't quite grasp the idea until he grabbed on to the living Lord. Most came to believe because they were told by someone who had seen the vision at the empty tomb or encountered the risen Jesus himself. Those testimonies have been passed on in a Never-ending Alleluia, an unbroken line from then to now.

So, what remains of the Easter Morning experience for us? How do we hear the Good News that Jesus is not dead – and make any sense of it at all? Who shared the story of Jesus with you, and why did you see God at work in them? What is your Moment of Truth when you look into an empty tomb? And if you had that “aha moment of truth” what would you do next? Two of the other gospels say the women were told that “Jesus has gone before you into Galilee, there you will see him” and that little bit of information might open up a tomb for you today.

In Who Will Roll Away the Stone? author Ched Myers says, *“Here is a possibility we never considered, a prospect too terrible to contemplate. And invitation to follow Jesus – again. To resume the Way, the consequences of which we now know all too well. Suddenly,*

from deep within us, from that unexplored space underneath our profoundest hopes and fears, roars a tidal wave of trauma, ecstasy and terror all at once. We race out of that tomb as if we had just seen a ghost."

Last week, as the Choir rehearsed for Palm Sunday, we turned to an all-time favorite that would introduce the Passion story, the title piece from the cantata, *Once Upon a Tree*. Years ago, I had been so touched by a particular phrase in that song that I had drawn cartoon penguins on the first page of my music, and written next to them: "*Don't think about the words...think about penguins...*" That was my way of keeping my composure so as to be able to sing. Those words still move me: "For God so loved the world, he gave his priceless pearl, what greater love could there be? He died, he rose again, still the story doesn't end. For his Spirit is living in me."

"His spirit is living in me..." the Spirit Jesus gave back to God on the cross when he said, "into your hands I commend my Spirit!" The Spirit of the Lord which was upon him when he preached his first sermon. The Spirit Jesus breathed on the disciples and us, when John the Baptist said, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!" And sure enough, God received Jesus' Spirit, and poured it on to; **in to us**...so that WE might be Christ to our neighbor. Big Shoes to fill today. Big expectations from God for us. Big challenges to meet as we enjoy the fruits of God's abundant love and the calling of God to his very Spirit, that is living in you...that Spirit has seen miracles, and death, power, greed and overwhelming love, sacrifice and terror – and amazing grace.

But what does Easter mean? Different things to different lives. Perhaps your answer is, "God raised Jesus from the dead." Or maybe it's "Jesus saved me from my sins." What about "It proves that God loves me no matter what" or even "Now I know that I will be raised on the last day and spend eternity in heaven." Today I'd like to suggest something different, something ongoing. How about, "Easter means that now my life is not my own, because of Jesus' emptying himself on the cross – my life belongs elsewhere." A moment of truth.

So Easter unfolds in each life. Perhaps you are here today and today only. Maybe you sit here 52 Sundays a year. But no matter how you come today, you are welcome in this place. You are forgiven for your thoughts and deeds, for your poverty of mercy and your sinful, stinging nature. And at this altar, we are all the same: those with power and those with none; those with wealth and education, and those for whom these gifts mean little; those with health and love and those who yearn for either; those who are dead, and those who need to be fed.

Today, we are called on to give up our power and take on the power of God. That is the essence of Easter. This is your day of Resurrection. This is your moment of truth. Because God so loved the whole world that he gave himself to us completely, so that whoever chooses God over self, will have eternal life. Rejoice! For not only have you SEEN the Lord; the Spirit of Jesus Christ - the beloved Son, the Savior of the World, the One who makes all things new – is living...in you. Amen.

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Resources: "Conversations with God V: Lord, I am Afraid..." Sermon for Lent 5 – 2014; Faith Lens for 4.21.19; Rev. Canon John Thompson-Quartey, Day1.org; Ched Myers in *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?*