

HOPE—FOR THIS LIFE AND THE NEXT

LUKE 24:1-12; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:19-26

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Christ is risen!

This is the best Sunday of the year to be a preacher! This is a day for proclaiming a new reality that has broken into our world and into our lives as Jesus' followers. Christ is risen indeed!

On Good Friday, I urged us to not move too quickly to what the cross *does* and to simply dwell in the human story of Jesus' death.

I want to do the same today at the empty tomb.

Before we get to how the resurrection might speak into our context today, I want to spend these first few moments simply dwelling at the empty tomb with the women, with Peter. Sticking just with the account from Luke:

- To begin with the obvious, the women go to the tomb *expecting* to find a dead body... despite the fact that Jesus had in fact predicted his resurrection, and even said it would happen three days later (three times in Matthew alone — 16:21-23; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).
- They are perplexed—the empty tomb is not an immediate source of joy or discovery, but confusion (Luke 24:4)
- They are terrified at the presence of the angels (24:5)
- The women rush back to tell the disciples and, with the exception of Peter, they aren't even intrigued—"It seemed to them an idle tale."
- The first reaction of Jesus' followers to the empty tomb isn't "Could it be? Did he rise from the dead?" but "someone must have moved the body" (e.g., John 20:2)

Even when Jesus *himself* shows up, he has to tell them not to be afraid (this is clear in each of the Gospel accounts).

Before the empty tomb ever came to be seen as a sign of victory or the vindication of Jesus' life and kingdom proclamation or any of that, it was experienced as a source of fear and confusion and uncertainty *by those who had been closest to Jesus*.

This is both reassuring to see the human side of the story (would we have been different?) *and* theologically interesting.

One often hears the claim that the resurrection could not really have happened—that it was a kind of cover up by the first disciples to save face.

The gospel accounts do not read like a conspiracy to cover up Jesus' death. The first disciples would never have dreamed up something like a crucified Messiah rising from the dead—this was not *in any way* what they were hoping for!—and the unflattering way in which their own responses to the empty tomb are portrayed confirms this.

The disciples quite clearly were not expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. There is not even a hint of expectation or ambiguity, not even a trace of, “You know, he said some strange things about dying and about three days later....”

Rather, they are a fearful, confused, devastated bunch who, for by all outward appearances, look like little more than a shattered remnant of a failed leader.

There are many good reasons to believe that the resurrection of Jesus really did happen based on all kinds of different evidence, but for me, one of the most compelling reasons of all is the sheer humanity of this story!

Where can we find ourselves in this story today?

Whatever else we might want to say about that first Easter Sunday, it seems clear that he first disciples' horizons were too small to accommodate something as radically new and unexpected and life-transforming as Jesus being raised from the dead.

To be sure, once their horizons were expanded by the risen Lord they could hardly be held back. Inspired and filled with the Spirit of the Living Christ, they went out and told the story of the good news until their dying day. They told the story about how the God of creation had done something new in Jesus, how sins could be forgiven and new life experienced, and about how in this crucified Messiah, the kingdom of God was advancing—a kingdom of love and peace and joy that could be experience both now and in the age to come if his offer of salvation were accepted.

But initially, their horizons were too small.

I think the same is true for us. It seems to me that our story since those early years is a story of this all-encompassing, radical conviction about the scope of the implications of Easter gradually giving way to smaller stories.

This is most obviously true on a broader cultural level.

We see it in the kind of default-secularism that has become the norm in the West.

The assumption is that this world is all there is, that there is nothing beyond the time we have here on earth, so the only response is to get as much out of it as we can.

Death is the end, so enjoy yourself before it comes for you.

There is no shortage of examples.

After the recent death of Apple founder Steve Jobs, his famous commencement address at Stanford University in 2005 received a lot of attention. Here are a few lines:

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become.

This is a familiar message indeed.

Just yesterday morning, I was watching soccer on TV and saw a beer commercial (it's always the beer commercials!) that showed wonderful images of strolling down beaches and skydiving and lavish parties and all kinds of other incredible scenes. Over top of all these scenes we hear a voice, "If there's one undeniable truth about life, it's that you only get one chance at it. Will you have done enough? Will you have lived life on your own terms?"

Be true to yourself. Live life on your own terms. Make sure you experience enough. We hear this message every day in countless implicit and explicit ways.

This is a fairly dramatic shrinking of horizons (not to mention a lot of pressure!)

The church's horizons have often tended to shrink, too. Perhaps it was because Jesus' expected return did not happen as quickly as anticipated. Perhaps the church's memory grew dim. Perhaps, with each passing year, it grew increasingly difficult to believe and live into this massive good news.

There are two general ways in which this shrinking of horizons about Easter has shown up throughout history, right down to the present day.

The first way is that the resurrection is seen mainly as a means of securing some kind of otherworldly post-mortem existence for those who believe in Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus serves mainly as a proof that someone could survive death and a guarantee that those who believe correctly about God will do so, too.

In its most basic form, it is reduced to: “Jesus rose from the dead so that we can go to heaven when we die.”

While the resurrection undoubtedly *does* open the door for eternal life, this view often seems to have the effect of having little to say about *this* life and it seems to have very little connection to Jesus’ life and ministry, his proclamation of the kingdom of God.

Conversely, others found the idea of a literal, miraculous resurrection too difficult to believe. Modern scientific people could hardly be expected to believe in miracles, after all!

This “shrinking of horizons” involves transferring the events of Easter from the category of “history” to the category of “symbol.”

That first resurrection that so bewildered and baffled the disciples now becomes a nice metaphor for the promise of spring, or the possibility of change in our lives, or the importance of embracing a kind of generic “hope” for a better future.

In the first case, resurrection became so otherworldly that it had practically no implications for *this* life—no continuity between creation and *new* creation; in the second, it became too *this* worldly to do justice to its cosmic and eternal implications.

In both cases, the horizons of the magnificent good news of that first Easter have grown far too small.

Just like the first disciples who stood struggled to understand what God was doing with an empty tomb, we could perhaps do with an expanding of our horizons, all these years later.

This is what our text from 1 Corinthians points to.

For Paul, the resurrection isn’t just the cherry on top of the cake or a happy ending tacked on at the end of a long and meandering story.

The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and God's vindication of him as Messiah and King is the foundation of our faith.

If the resurrection is only a nice metaphor for hope in this life, Paul says, we are objects of pity.

Not "a little misguided." Not "basically right, except for the ending part." Not "on the right track." Not a psychologically useful way to cope with life.

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Just a few verses earlier, Paul puts it even more strongly:

If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain (15:14)

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (15:17).

Is Paul saying that the resurrection is *only* important for the future? No.

We must read our text this morning alongside other texts. A few chapters later, for example, in the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says these words:

17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Again, in Romans 8, Paul concludes a passage talking about the possibility a new life no longer enslaved by sin by saying that this is possible *because* of the indwelling of the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead."

For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead makes new life possible *now!*

It is not a remote future reality that we simply wait for, but an already established reality, guaranteed by God, that we are invited to participate in the present.

Taken as whole, Paul's message (and the message of all of Scripture) is that resurrection is for *all* of life—this life, and the next.

Resurrection is always pushing against the edges of our horizons, always expanding, always illuminating, always inviting us into a hope and a God who is bigger and better than we can imagine.

How desperately we need these bigger horizons.

We need the enlivening hope of the spirit of the risen Christ to permeate our lives and embolden us to live resurrection lives as a foretaste of God's future.

And, we need this hope that the death, the enemy that haunts our steps and stalks our best intentions, is no match for the God of life.

I suspect that there are people here today in both camps. Some of us need to hear the invitation to embrace the new life of Christ *right now*. We need hope to become less of a remote future possibility and more of a present reality.

We need the spirit of Christ to breathe life into our bones, to inspire us to put on the character of Christ, to be part of the newness God is bringing amidst the oldness of our world.

And some of us need a reminder of the strong hope *beyond* this life.

Some of us are walking with those who are staring death in the face, some of us are walking with people who are suffering and in pain, people who are frightened by loss and terrified of the future.

We need this vision of the empty tomb—of the risen Lord who takes the sting out of death, who holds out his hand and beckons into a future of hope and new creation.

We need this hope—*all* of us, for *all* of life.

The resurrection is not a nice metaphor for the possibility of newness and change in our lives.

The resurrection is not a divine mechanism that gives us an escape hatch out of the world when we die.

Rather, the resurrection is God's s glorious affirmation that life will outlive death.

It God's decisive act, in history, to vindicate Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as the defeat of the power of sin and evil and all that holds his children captive AND to validate Jesus as the example of what a truly human life looks like.

The giving of bread, the healing of disease, the challenge of injustice, the washing of feet, the listening, the rebuking, the inspiring, the raising, the confusing, the illuminating, the loving, the suffering... everything about who Jesus was and what he did is given God's stamp of approval in the empty tomb.

Everything about who Jesus was, everything about what he did and taught, everything he showed us, every possibility he opened for us, *everything* receives one big “YES” at the resurrection.

Yes, this is how the world is made new.

Follow him. He showed the way.

Emulate him. This is what it means to truly live.

Trust him. He will never leave or forsake you.

Confess and believe. He will forgive and redeem.

Look to him. He will show you what new life looks like, now and in the life to come.

The resurrection is nothing less than the beginning of the end of death—our last enemy, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:26.

I often close with a quote. I do this because I frequently come across writers and passages that say things so beautifully and so much better than I can. This is from a book by Jürgen Moltmann called *In the End—The Beginning*

The resurrection message burst through the frontiers and was universal: Christ has been raised not as an individual but as Israel’s messiah, as the Son of man of the nations, as humanity’s ‘new Adam’, and as “the first-born of all creation”.... The risen Christ pulls Adam with his right hand and Eve with his left, and with them draws the whole of humanity out of the world of death into the transfigured world of eternal life. His new beginning in his end is the beginning of God’s new world in the passing away of this one. Whether this world will come to an end, and whatever that end may be, the Christian hope says: God’s future has already begun. With Christ’s resurrection from the catastrophe of Golgotha the new beginning has already been made, a beginning which will never again pass away.

The new beginning has already been made. God’s future has already begun. And we are invited to live into this life.

Thanks be to God.