

The Collision of an Empty Tomb

Luke 24:1–12

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Christ is risen!

This is a Sunday for joy and for hope, for celebrating that the grace could not contain the Lord of hope.

But I want to begin where we left off on Thursday evening at our Maundy Thursday service. To do this, I am going to use the words of an article that I came across yesterday morning. It is by an Episcopalian priest from Virginia named Sam Bush who asks us to imagine a world without redemption:

Every Maundy Thursday, we are given a chance to conceive a world without redemption. As the service ends, the altar is stripped of all its linens, paraments and ornaments so that not even a candlestick remains. Veils are draped over every cross, hiding them from view. It can be a jarring experience, watching the liturgical colors slowly drain away until all that remains is black on wood. Flannery O'Connor once said, **“Often the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence.” So it goes with our salvation. We never realized how much we needed it until it’s seemingly taken away.**¹

We didn’t have linens, paraments, and ornaments or veils at our Maundy Thursday service. But we did have candles. And when we blew the last one out on Thursday night, when we sat in the darkness and the silence together for a few minutes, I felt a similar heaviness to what Sam Bush describes.

Imagine a world without redemption. What a terrible thing to contemplate!

¹ <https://mbird.com/holidays/lent/the-nature-of-grace-made-plain-by-its-absence/>

And yet there is the sense in which this was the very real experience of the disciples in between Thursday evening and Sunday morning.

Bush puts it well:

On Maundy Thursday we imagine our lives as unredeemed. Without the Cross, we are abandoned to ourselves, left to bear the world on its own terms. **Without Jesus by our side, we are faced with the horrifying possibility that our life is in our own hands. That our days on this earth are nothing but what we make of them, that we really are, at the end of the day, alone.**

Lives unredeemed. Abandoned to ourselves. Bearing the world on its own terms. Our lives in our own hands. Alone.

I wonder, was this how the disciples felt the morning of the third day after the worst day of their lives?

Last Sunday. I urged us to not move too quickly from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday and to simply dwell in the human story of Jesus as he approached the city of Jerusalem, and as he looked ahead to what he knew lay before him.

Before we get to how the reality of resurrection made its way into the world and what it means for us, I want us to spend a few moments simply dwelling at the empty tomb with the women, with Peter.

Each year when I read the gospel accounts of the resurrection, I am struck by how stunned the first witnesses were.

The women go to the tomb *expecting* to find a dead body—even though Jesus had explicitly predicted that he would rise from the dead three days after his death, as we’ve seen over the last few Sundays (Luke 18:31-34).

And yet even the discovery of an empty tomb is not an immediate source of joy or wonder, but confusion and fear.

After the initial shock, the women rush back to tell the disciples and, with the exception of Peter, the disciples don’t even seem intrigued— “It seemed to them an idle tale.”

The composite picture presented by the four gospel accounts is that 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, or God's decisive defeat of sin, death, and evil...

Before *any* of this, it was experienced as a source of fear and confusion and uncertainty **by those who had been closest to Jesus**. This is remarkable.

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, or that Jesus “rose in the disciples’ hearts” and that the resurrection stories are just a way of conveying the power of this metaphor.

The gospel accounts simply do not read like a conspiracy to cover up Jesus' death. They *certainly* don't read like a clever way to talk about resurrection as a spiritual metaphor for new possibility.

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

Rather, the disciples are a fearful, confused, devastated bunch who, 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!

Each Easter, we, like those first witnesses, must remind ourselves and joyfully proclaim the shock, the bewilderment, the sheer unexpected joy of that first Easter: ***This really happened.***

Our worship theme throughout the season of Lent has been “Christ Collides.” We have been looking at how Jesus' teachings, his actions, his interactions with others all collide with our expectations, assumptions, preferences, etc.

The empty tomb is the biggest, most shocking collision of all.

With an empty tomb, Christ collides with death, with sin, with evil, with hopelessness, with betrayal and abandonment, with resignation and fear, with cynicism and despair, with faithlessness and cowardice, with doubt and sorrow...

The list could go on.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a collision so powerful that it *has* changed and continues to change the world.

Each Easter, I revisit a poem by John Updike called “Seven Stanzas at Easter” which I think conveys the force of this collision beautifully and truly.

I’ve quoted it in Easter sermons before and I want to read a few stanzas again today:

Make no mistake: if he rose at all
It was as His body;
If the cell’s dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit,
The amino acids rekindle,
The Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
Each soft spring recurrent;
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the Eleven apostles;
It was as His flesh; ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes
The same valved heart
That—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then regathered
Out of enduring Might
New strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping transcendence,
Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded
Credulity of earlier ages:

Let us walk through the door...

Let us not mock God with metaphor! Let us walk through the door, this Easter Sunday.

And as our resurrection guide, let's walk with Peter.

Peter is perhaps the easiest of the disciples for us to identify with. Peter is the disciple of the highest highs and the lowest lows.

- It is Peter who walks courageously toward Jesus on water... and then faithlessly sinks (Mat. 14:28-30)
- It is Peter who is the first to confess Jesus as the Messiah... and immediately after, refuses to accept that Jesus must suffer and is promptly rebuked by Jesus—Get behind me Satan (Mat. 16:22-23)
- It is Peter who is the eager beaver pupil on the Mount of Transfiguration—wants to build shelters to commemorate the holy moment with Elijah, Moses, and Jesus, before he is interrupted by the divine voice with different priorities and falls down terrified (Mat. 17:3-6).
- It is Peter who thinks he is impressing Jesus in a discussion about forgiveness by saying, “Up to seven time??” and us then stunned by Jesus’ stuns response: “Not seven times, but seventy times seven...” (Mat. 18:21-22).
- It is Peter who speaks the famous words that Christians down through the ages have claimed as their own: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:67-69)
- It is Peter who refuses to let Jesus wash his feet on the evening of the Last Supper... then, when Jesus says, “unless I wash your feet you have no part in me,” breathlessly says, “Then not just my feet, my whole body!” (John 13:8-9)
- It is Peter who falls asleep while praying in Gethsemane (Mat. 26:40). *Could you not stay awake one hour?*
- It is Peter who cuts off a Roman soldier’s ear in a spasm of righteous violence (John 18:10)
- It is Peter who, in one of the most gut-wrenching scenes of the Passion narrative, denies Jesus explicitly, and then weeps at the realization of what he has done (John 18:25-27)

Our text from Luke this morning ends with Peter as the only disciple willing to consider that the testimony of the women is anything other than an idle tale.

(This is another fascinating feature of the resurrection accounts! The first witnesses to Easter were women. And the men mostly didn't believe them! It was women who had a front row seat to resurrection on the day that the world was changed forever; it was a woman who first said, "I have seen the Lord.")

Peter stands amazed at Jesus' empty tomb. He doesn't know yet what it means. But he will.

Peter knows that what he is faced with is no metaphor. Perhaps he has an inkling that something huge has changed, that these strips of linen represent the turning point of all history. But he didn't know all this right away.

Resurrection was a reality that he had to walk into.

In our bibles, the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are separated by the gospel of John. But Luke is the author of both Luke and Acts, and it was originally written as one volume.

And it's interesting to bypass John follow Peter from the end of Luke to the beginning of Acts.

The last we hear of Peter in Luke is in our text this morning. He sprints to the empty tomb, sees the strips of linen. And He walks away wondering what has happened.

By the time Acts 2 rolls around, Peter isn't wondering any more. He is confidently proclaiming the good news of resurrection at Pentecost.

He preaches to the Sanhedrin, to onlookers, to anyone who will listen. He heals in Jesus' name.

The resurrection of Jesus has transformed Peter the denier, the sleeper, the blurter-out-of-answers into the rock upon which Christ is building his church.

The resurrection has changed everything.

But on Easter morning, at the sight of an empty tomb, Peter still has much to learn. Resurrection is an ongoing living reality that keeps drawing Peter forward into unexpected new possibilities and new life.

The same is true for us.

How will we walk through the door opened by resurrection? How will our lives radiate out into the world after the collision of the empty tomb?

Perhaps another way of asking the question is, “How would you live if you really believed that sin and death and evil had been defeated forever by the Lord of life?”

Or another way still, “How would we live if we really believed that redemption was possible?”

I think there are at least two general convictions that ought to guide the life of everyone who has encountered the risen Christ.

Nothing good that we do is wasted.

Nothing we do to inject beauty, hope, kindness, care, truth, peace, and justice into the world is wasted. No clinging to faith in the face of mockery, no prayer offered in desperate need, no song sung, no garden lovingly tended, no poem crafted, no meal prepared, no burden shared, no hope proclaimed, no tiny act of reconciliation negotiated, no forgiveness offered, no mercy generously extended is wasted, no matter how it might seem.

Each one of these things may seem like feeble offerings in a world of cruelty, violence, triviality, idolatry, and greed. They do not look like victory proclamations. But they are.

Because these are the kinds of things that Jesus did...
... and because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

No suffering that we endure is final.

No losses, no disease, none of our tears for the violence and destruction in our world (and there is so much violence and destruction in our world!), no grief over relationships that seem broken beyond repair despite our best efforts, no doubts that threaten to crush us, no fear for a future that we cannot understand, no sin and failure that accuse us and weigh us down, no death that threatens to break us with grief is final.

Each one of these things hurts. Sometimes they hurt terribly. But they are not the end.

Because these are the dark places that Jesus entered into and suffered on our behalf...
...and because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

The Christian life is nothing more and nothing less than a joyful response to an empty tomb.

We, too, are witnesses.

We, too, are to be those who joyfully scratch our heads like Peter and say, *Well, I guess nothing is impossible anymore. The rules of the game have changed because of Easter.*

The tomb is empty. Death has been defeated and refused the final word. The door to life eternal, in this world and the next, has been thrown wide open.

We do not have to imagine a world without redemption for our Redeemer lives.

Let us walk through the door. With Peter, with our sisters and brothers around the world, with Christians down through the ages.

Let us see what resurrection has yet to show us.

Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed.*

Amen.

