

## Scripture Readings for Easter Sunday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022

### 1 Cor 15:19-26 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. <sup>20</sup> But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. <sup>23</sup> But each in turn: Christ, the first-fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. <sup>24</sup> Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

### Luke 24:1-12 (NIV)

<sup>24</sup> On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. <sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup> but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. <sup>4</sup> While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. <sup>5</sup> In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: <sup>7</sup> 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" <sup>8</sup> Then they remembered his words. <sup>9</sup> When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. <sup>10</sup> It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. <sup>12</sup> Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

### Sermon: Follow the Evidence!

The highlight of the Christian calendar is today, Easter Sunday, the day we celebrate Jesus risen from the tomb! It's a day of hope, light, and life replacing despair, darkness, and death. And we all need that kind of hope to thrive. Yet hope without solid foundations can become wishful thinking. Jesus wanted us to build our lives on the rock, not on sand, and so we need to consider again the basis of our hope in a disbelieving, even cynical, world. While some people may knowingly want to believe a lie, I don't. I value truth and facts, but we all know that the resurrection defies normal experience, so where do we begin? The answer is simple: *follow the evidence*. Every detective knows that, and so does every

historian and scientist. The trouble is, we filter that evidence by what we *think* we know and when we come to something we can't explain we simply say: "That's impossible!" and instantly dismiss it. Our preconceived ideas can blind us to new important discoveries. It takes a genius, like Copernicus and Einstein, to see reality in a radically new and different way. In an analogous way, the evidence of the resurrection invites us to see reality in a completely novel and distinctive way. The question is, will we have the courage to open our minds and explore the evidence wherever it may lead us? I hope so! It begins with taking witness accounts seriously as well as critically. We can only begin that process today.

To set the scene: first, recall that *Jesus really was dead*. No scholar seriously doubts that. The Romans soldiers were expert killers and they certainly wouldn't have released Jesus' body to Joseph of Arimathea without ensuring Jesus was truly dead.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the word resurrection means, it's *not* resuscitation. Second, remember *nobody expected the resurrection*. Even the concept of some kind of resurrection at the *end* of time was debated by 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish scholars, with the most senior leaders saying, "No, that's *not* going to happen." The disciples weren't anticipating it, and neither were the women who went to the tomb laden with spices to properly attend to Jesus' body. So what happened? We don't know exactly, but something profound, unusual – even singular - seems to have occurred.

Let's pause here for a moment and consider a family gathering; you might be having one this weekend. One thing that frequently happens is a time of *reminiscing*, for example, of recalling a distant vacation or some other memorable incident. What you find is that the now grown-up children remember things differently from the parents! Yet you were all participants in what has become a collective memory. Certain details stick out more in some people's minds than in others. And even that can be a source of humor and celebration in its retelling. It's important to hear such stories again because it's part of our common history and has shaped our identity. I suggest the same is true of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Each Gospel's version is different, although they all agree that it was the women who were the first witnesses to the resurrection. I leave you to explore those accounts and try and connect them, while recognizing that witness' reports can *vary in the detail yet agree in substance*. E. P. Sanders puts it this way: "From the accounts we have, it looks very much as though early Christians were struggling to describe something they *knew* had happened but for which they were aware they didn't have good language." I think he's right. A new phenomenon requires new terminology and new meanings for words, and - in this case - it challenges our assumptions and leads to a novel paradigm – a new way of viewing reality.

Luke's version tells us the women returned to the tomb early on Sunday morning to perform the burial customs on the dead body and were shocked to find that the stone covering the tomb's entrance had been rolled away. Moreover, they saw the body was missing, which means they had the courage to

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<sup>1</sup> See Luke 13:46-47, 52-53; Mark 15:44-45. The soldiers would have paid with their own lives if found to be incompetent!

enter the cave.<sup>2</sup> “What is going on?” they asked themselves. At which point two heavenly messengers came alongside them and the women were terrified!<sup>3</sup> Luke stresses that they were *men* and that there were *two* of them; that’s a piece of cultural evidence that implies to the reader their testimony, however incredible, would be reliable. The angels’ message was clear: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has been raised!” That’s an unequivocal statement and it blows the mind.<sup>4</sup> It also affirms that the women were looking in the right place, even though we have no grounds to doubt that, and it answers those who would question if his body had been moved elsewhere or stolen by graverobbers.<sup>5</sup> No, the angelic witnesses proclaim *Jesus has been raised*, and the Greek wording implies this was *an act of God*.<sup>6</sup> The angels continue, “Remember how Jesus told you, while he was still with you in Galilee that: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’”<sup>7</sup> Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, he informs us that Jesus had told the disciples about these Easter events in *three* separate warnings,<sup>8</sup> as well as hinting at them in some of his parables.<sup>9</sup> Luke then adds: “*The women remembered*.”<sup>10</sup> And, amusingly, Luke now informs us that three of the women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James – as if he had only just remembered that himself!

Regardless of their remembering, I suspect that the women were still confused and anxious – just as we would have been. Moreover, not only were they *not* anticipating a resurrection, they were still in a state of shock from the events of Good Friday. The crucifixion of Jesus was a momentous anticlimax from what they expected just a week ago. The group of women then went back to the other disciples and told them what they had *witnessed* and *recalled*.<sup>11</sup> However, the men thought they were talking complete nonsense and, in a sense, were exhibiting a modern skeptical attitude.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Peter was intrigued enough by this report to check it out for himself. So, according to Luke, Peter runs to the tomb. When he gets there, he also discovers it’s empty. Peter then returns home trying to figure out what happened and what it all means.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:3.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 24:4-7; see also Luke 9:30; Acts 1:10; Deut 19:15. (Two witnesses were deemed important to verify the claim.)

<sup>4</sup> We are likely full of questions, and not a little fear, but we need to explore all the evidence before coming to a conclusion.

<sup>5</sup> However, if the religious or political authorities could have produced the dead body of Jesus, any claims that he was resurrected would have been instantly refuted. Obviously, that did not occur.

<sup>6</sup> This is *not* some bizarre miracle of Jesus – he was, after all, *dead*!

<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:5b-7.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 9:22; 44; 18:31-34. No mention is made of the *type* of death – crucifixion. Moreover, the divine “must” shows Luke’s understanding of providence.

<sup>9</sup> See Luke 15:24, 32; 16:31.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 24:8.

<sup>11</sup> Given that there were *multiple* witnesses, they *should* have been credible.

<sup>12</sup> Consequently, it wouldn’t have made any difference if those first witnesses at the tomb were men rather than women. We are then told that on hearing this report, Peter ran to the tomb and also saw that it was empty, except for the strips of cloth, and went home *wondering* what had happened (Luke 24:12). See also v24 which suggests Peter was *not* alone! Presumably v34 refers to some other occasion.

<sup>13</sup> In Luke 24:38, the implication is that Peter had an encounter with the risen Jesus.

This is only the beginning of the post-resurrection events. Not only does Luke go on to describe the “road to Emmaus encounter,”<sup>14</sup> his subsequent book of Acts continues to unpack the consequences of the resurrection in the life of the followers of Jesus. All that evidence needs exploring too, but we won’t do that today! The bottom line is that Peter and the others become totally convinced that God raised Jesus from the dead. Moreover, that act forced them to rethink and revise their theology. In other words to grapple with the meaning of all the events of Easter week, and Luke makes it clear that this was a fulfillment of important Old Testament scriptures that had either been misunderstood or overlooked.<sup>15</sup> The disciples couldn’t explain the mysterious resurrection in scientific terms, and neither can we, but neither could they deny the reality of what they had witnessed.

In contrast, many today are inclined to try and explain bodily resurrection *away*. Such an event doesn’t fit it with our modern sensibilities.<sup>16</sup> So we attempt to explain the resurrection as a *non-literal metaphor*, such as hope springs eternal in the face of the finality of death. Others dismiss those stories of personal encounters with the risen Jesus as simply psychological fantasies. Some have gone further and proposed bizarre explanations of mass hypnosis, or of mass denial - a collective disassociation from reality as a result of severe trauma. Moreover, because of Plato’s influence, many Christians today are more likely to embrace the idea of an immortal soul than bodily resurrection. I find none of these proposed suggestions to be credible. All of these alternates arise because we are already committed to a worldview that excludes the possibility of bodily resurrection and so, regardless of the evidence, we will find a way to dismiss it. Galileo faced the same opposition to his new ideas. As I said earlier, the historical evidence of the resurrection invites us to see reality in a completely novel and distinctive way.

The apostle Paul, whose letters predate the Gospels, was prepared to embrace that intellectual challenge. He informs the Corinthian church, who struggled themselves with resurrection language (so it’s not just a modern thing), that “*if there’s categorically no resurrection of the dead then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching has been futile, and your faith is empty – it’s pointless and powerless.*”<sup>17</sup> I believe Paul got that stark logic right; without a bodily resurrection the Christian faith is built on sand. And *if* we ministers keep pushing a theology that is not based on historical events or is not factually true, *then* not only are we liars and deceivers of others,<sup>18</sup> we are to be pitied for our foolishness.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Luke 24:12-35.

<sup>15</sup> See Luke 24:25-27, 32, 44-45.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the rise of the anti-science movement will give rise to greater credence to the resurrection account - but I doubt it, as I suggest that is - in fact - more of an *anti-authority* movement.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Cor 15:13-14.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor 15:15-16.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor 15:19.

But that is *not*, in fact, the case, says Paul, and in light of his own experience and reflections he provides a theological explanation of the Easter events, as we heard in our other reading.<sup>20</sup> He saw God's raising of Jesus from the dead as the first of a larger harvest of those who have died. He saw Christ's resurrection as the prototype of God's new creation. The real issue is *not* "How is this possible?" but, "What does this new thing God has done *mean*?" The first question focuses purely on the physical world, the second *includes* God activity in the world, something secular science and history deliberately excludes. Paul's explanation then reaches back to Adam as the first human being and he says Jesus is a new, second Adam, a fresh start because *he proved to be faithful to God*, whereas Adam didn't. And that's *why* God raised Jesus from the dead, publicly vindicating him to the whole world, and especially to those who failed to recognize him as God's chosen King. And because God raised Jesus, those who Jesus calls his own will also be raised to life on the last day. The last enemy to be overcome is death and Jesus has already done that! God has now made him King over all and one day all will recognize that fact. It took Paul and the other early church leaders' years – decades – to better understand the larger significance of the crucifixion in light of the resurrection.<sup>21</sup> The resurrection isn't then just a quirky miracle; it is *pivotal* to understanding God and the whole world.

Incidentally, when it comes to the nature of the resurrection body, according to Paul it's a *transformed* physicality, not the same kind of body as our present one. Our future resurrection body, something Jesus has now, will not be merely an ethereal spirit, but an *embodied* spirit *animated* by another type of life that won't wear out! Does that excite you? Does this provide a sense of hope for the future? Does this convince you that death "has indeed lost its sting"?<sup>22</sup> I hope you can begin to see why the resurrection is of *first* importance and can't simply be pushed off to one side. Let's follow the evidence!

In conclusion, as Christians, we base our hope on a particular event in human history – the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The cross and the resurrection are not just about the forgiveness of sin, it is also about God's bigger plan to rescue and put right all that is distorted in the whole of the created order. If we are not careful, by denying the resurrection we find ourselves turning inwards and consider our own religious *experiences* of prime importance. We must have our whole *worldview* turned upside down because the hope of the Church is not confined to *this* world but focused on the faithfulness of a *Creator* God. And it's our confidence in the future resurrection that gives us the courage and freedom to live in the shadow of the cross as we identify with the sufferings of this present age. Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>20</sup> See 1 Cor 15:19-26 – indeed, the whole chapter.

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/If-Christ-Has-Not-Been-Raised.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Transformed-Bodies.pdf> .

<sup>21</sup> And they did so in the context of Old Testament imagery and prophecies – see [15].

<sup>22</sup> 1 Cor 15:55 – citing Hosea 13:14 (LXX). (See also 1 Cor 15:54b – citing Isa 25:8.)