

The Resurrection Discovery

On this Easter Sunday our New Testament reading is Luke 24:1-12, as we give attention to the visit of the women followers of Jesus to the tomb on the third day after his crucifixion. Waiting till the end of the Saturday Sabbath, on early Sunday morning they bring spices to anoint what they expected to be the corpse of Jesus, and they make the resurrection discovery.

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. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² 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.*

An important word at the very beginning of the 24th chapter is “But,” a simple disjunctive conjunction that connects the preceding narrative in chapter 23 about the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus. A disjunctive expresses an alternative or opposition between the meaning of the words or thoughts connected. Jesus was crucified, he died and was buried, *but* that was not the end of his story. The women followers of Jesus fully expected to find his corpse on that Sunday morning, *but* they made an amazing discovery. This morning I want us to join this group of devoted women followers of Jesus who make a life-changing, in fact, a world-changing discovery of this amazing truth of the resurrection of Jesus.

Their discovery and ours begins with wondering. The women come to the tomb and are totally taken by surprise by what they discover. They’re expecting a sealed tomb, for which they would need help in removing the stone from the entrance to that cave-like tomb. Then entering the tomb, they’re once again surprised to see the body of the Lord isn’t there, where it had been laid after his crucifixion three days before. They’re perplexed. The fact of the resurrection of a man whose body was beaten, tortured, executed on a cross, his dead body stabbed with a spear thrust in the side, where blood and water poured out, defies logic. His body was wrapped tightly in traditional grave-cloths and laid on a burial shelf in the tomb. The Jewish leaders, who feared that Jesus’ disciples would

steal his body and hide it in order to claim he was alive, had Pilate seal the entrance and post guards at the tomb (Matthew 27:62-66).

The women were bewildered by what appeared to be unsolved and inexplicable mysteries—a tomb that had been under Roman guard was now empty. A massive stone had been rolled away; and, as noted later by Simon Peter, “*linen cloths by themselves*” (12), and not the work of anyone who would have stolen the body.

The truth about Jesus and his resurrection is highly unlikely and incredible to the unbeliever, who thinks in terms only of the observable, the tangible and “verifiable.” Paul reminded the Corinthians, who even as believers needed to be corrected in their thinking, that Kingdom of God reality is eternal and not yet seen by us in this world of time and space limitations (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). When the women related the discovery of Jesus’ resurrection, the men disciples thought their story was nonsense (11).

As we pray for our unbelieving family, friends and colleagues, we need to understand again that the truths of the message about Jesus, his saving death and resurrection, were at one time perplexing to us. It was all new, strange, unfamiliar and maybe even uncomfortable and unwelcome. It was against all our presuppositions and our former way of life.

While the women stood perplexed about this mystery, two angels appeared, causing the women to bow in fright. The angels asked them a penetrating question: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (5). Indeed, why does anyone look for the living One, for the meaning of life itself, among dead philosophies and contrived theories?

It was the word of God from the angels, calling to the women’s minds the teachings of Jesus about his passion, death and resurrection, that turned perplexity into realizing. “They remembered his words” (8). “Remembering” was like a light bulb that had turned on inside their heads and suddenly the words of Jesus made sense. That’s the way faith works. You don’t get coerced or seduced into faith by miracles. Grace works in your heart to open you to God’s truth. And when by grace through faith you believe, you begin to understand. As has been said, we do not understand in order to believe. We believe in order to understand. Now these women moved from information to a life-changing discovery. This happens by the word and the Spirit.

We have an advantage that even the first century Christians, including the eye-witnesses to the risen Lord, didn’t have. This is the advantage or blessing that Jesus referred to when Thomas saw the risen Lord and believed. “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). We have the completed biblical canon of Scripture, including those that look forward to the Messiah, those that witness to the

incarnate Jesus and those that reflect upon the risen Christ. And we also have the Teacher and Witness, the Holy Spirit, who guides us and illumines us in our understanding of the truth. And by faith even we who have not seen him in fact love him. (1 Peter 1:8-9).

These women had received Jesus' words, predicting his suffering, death and resurrection, yet had failed to comprehend by faith until this moment of divinely-inspired remembering. Perhaps that experience was to be made complete when the Holy Spirit would fill them on the Day of Pentecost. Yet they had an encounter with the word of Christ and there was the subsequent experiencing the truth. The scales fell from their eyes.

This is what was meant by my seminary pastoral counseling professor's reply to the expressed doubts of one of the students, whose rationalistic thinking kept him from believing in the resurrection of Jesus. Professor Oates said that the resurrection is something that would have to happen to him rather than be convincingly explained to him. Miracles never have won anyone over to the faith. The same is true for arguments. The resurrection of Jesus is one of the best attested facts in history. Think of the evidence in Scripture in Old Testament prophecy and the New Testament fulfillment. The New Testament documents confirm one another, especially in the gospel accounts that obviously were not written as a coordinated conspiracy.

The empty tomb, the undisturbed grave cloths, the change of the day of worship from Saturday to Sunday, and the creation and vitality of the church and its 2,000 year advancement, despite opposition and even persecution, all bear witness to the verity of the resurrection. And the transformation of the disciples from defeated, fearful and disillusioned followers after the death of their Lord into indomitable witnesses to the One they were convinced was alive. And their willingness to witness of him, despite persecution and martyrdom, can be explained only by the fact they knew he was raised and is alive and is Lord over the church. As has been said, the resurrection was not the product of the church; rather, the church is the product of the resurrection.

As the professor said to the unbelieving student, resurrection is something that happens to you, even when you may not have a heart to believe. By the invading Holy Spirit, bringing the word of God to our minds and hearts, our reluctance is overcome.

CS Lewis aptly titled his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. As an unbeliever he was incredulous, but eventually overtaken by the evidence of the reality of God and his truth, even though he was not searching for God. "To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat" (182).

The resurrection discovery is confirmed by verbalizing (9-12). What these women saw and experienced was not something to be contained but rather was something that begged to be shared. And the fact that the first witnesses were women, in all four of the gospels, is evidence of the important role that God himself has given to women as trustworthy witnesses and bearers of responsibility. We see in the Scriptures an increasingly significant role of women in the work of the Kingdom of God. When they verbalized their experience to the other disciples the reality of their faith was confirmed in their own hearts. Verbalizing of our faith is the immediate impulse. *“Then they remembered his words,⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.”*

Christian witness, just like that of these women to their amazing discovery, is to be a spontaneous expression of joy. The word used by Andrew in telling his brother Peter about his discovery is “eureka! We have found the Messiah!” (John 1:41).

This is one of the many indications that the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection were not contrived by the gospel writers or the disciples. Women in that culture were not regarded as reliable witnesses. The testimony of these women was dismissed by the male disciples as “nonsense,” as “an idle tale.” If they were fabricating a tale about the resurrection of Jesus they would not have given to women the role of the first witnesses.

Your friends, family members and associates may try to deny or disprove the verity of Scripture and the historicity of the resurrection, though this has not been successfully done in 2,000 years worth of attempts by unbelievers. But no one can say that what you’ve experienced never happened, because in fact it’s *your* experience. Our testimony must remain viable, alive and undeniable, not by talking about a past experience only, but also by sharing what the risen Lord Jesus is doing in our lives today, answering prayer, giving strength, wisdom and encouragement, and involving us with him on mission and ministry.

This witnessing effort was not met with overwhelming success. Out of perhaps over 120 hearers, at first there was only one who responded. That was Simon Peter, who turned out to be an influential leader in the first church in the first century. The faithful verbalizing of your experience with the risen Lord Jesus may not meet with encouraging results, at least at first. .

The reluctance of the disciples to believe at first was not only their social prejudice about the credibility of female testimony. They had been deeply hurt and disappointed by the arrest and execution of their Master, an ultimate tragedy from the perspective of their failure to understand and believe what Jesus had told them. It was psychologically difficult for them to venture to believe the testimony of the women perhaps for fear of further disappointment should their story prove to be false.

In our praying for and sharing our testimony and the Good News with unbelievers, we must be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to work over the process of time. Even those who adamantly deny the truth about the risen Jesus and who seem to scorn our testimony may in time come to an understanding and a commitment to Jesus. Just like Simon Peter, they may suddenly get up and go to the tomb.

Our lives as Christians are not likely to have much of an impact on others without a strong sense of wonder over the reality of the resurrection. I think often about the difference a strong realization that Jesus lives would make in my life—in my thinking, my emotions, my actions, speech and relationships. If I were truly mindful that Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead on Easter morning and who reigns in heaven as the sovereign King of kings and Lord of lords, is with me all of the time, my life might have joy, peace and love overflowing. I would realize that I have something that begs to be shared with others that I know would make an everlasting difference in their lives.

The great missionary statesman, E Stanley Jones, told about a Christian preacher proclaiming the gospel in the bazaars of India. Interrupting him, a Muslim shouted, “Padre Sahib, we have a proof in our religion that you haven’t got in yours. We can go to Mecca and find the tomb of Mohammed, but when you go to Palestine you can’t be sure that you’ve got the tomb of Jesus.’ ‘Yes,’ said the Christian preacher, ‘you’re right. We have no tomb in Christianity because we have no corpse.’”

Some of us today who made a commitment to Jesus years ago have lost some of the wonder we once knew, wonder and amazement that once prompted us to share with others what Christ has done for us and is doing for us. Maybe you’ve been seeking to share Christ and are praying for a spouse or another person in your life who, like these disciples when they first heard the women’s report, is resistant to the message of Christ. Those you love may consider your witness and testimony as nonsense. Be encouraged that the risen Jesus is capable of making himself known to these people, just as he did to the 120 and then many more. Our part is simply to trust and pray and live in the awesome awareness that Jesus lives.

He is risen!