

The Resurrection of Jesus

24 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body.^[a] ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women^[b] were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men^[c] said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.^[d]” ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But 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.^[e]

Isaiah 65:17-19 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Glorious New Creation

¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.

¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.

Luke 24: 13-35 The Walk to Emmaus

¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.^[a] ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth,^[b] who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.^[c] Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women

had said; but they did not see him.”²⁵ Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³² They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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Luke 24:1-35

Proclaiming the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind

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Jesus Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Many of us are familiar with this Easter affirmation. It rolls off the tongue nicely. It makes for a rather unambiguous faith statement. It could be described as the most basic proclamation of the gospel. We might even want to stop this sermon right there. Enough said. Good news! The good news is this, death could not contain Jesus. He conquered it. And because he promised eternal life to his followers, it means we no longer need to fear death ourselves.

But not so fast. Let's back things up just a little bit. Of all the people who coulda been, shoulda been proclaiming this amazing news about Christ's resurrection – I would think the first responders woulda been the most excited. The ones with the front row seat to what was happening – well they had opportunity, right, to tell everyone that this Jesus, the teacher *THEY* had been following beat the system. Except for the fact that it was the women who found out first.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and some other unnamed women are first to Jesus' tomb. They meet the two men in dazzling clothes who tell them that he isn't there. And then these strangers remind them of what Jesus had been teaching them all along, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, crucified, and on the third day rise again. Jesus had been telling them – I will rise again. But was anyone really listening? Even when they saw an eye-witness account - or at least circumstantial evidence pointing in that direction, it seemed unbelievable.

Convinced though, they ran to tell the other disciples, the eleven, what they had seen. The others called it an idle tale.

Jesus Christ is risen.

An idle tale, indeed?

That very same day, two of them (presumably two who had been in Jesus' inner circle, one of them being Cleopas) were walking AWAY from Jerusalem. As you would do if you were worried about the repercussions of being one of Jesus' known companions. They were talking about the heartbreak of Jesus' death, when this stranger starts walking with them and asking what seemed to be stupid questions. "Why are you so sad?" the stranger asks. And they begin to tell this person about all that had happened in Jerusalem, and how their mighty prophet Jesus of Nazareth had been condemned to death and crucified. All had been lost. They had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel. It's been three days, and nothing. The best they have to offer is that the women went to his tomb and he wasn't there, but they think they saw angels who said he was alive.

Jesus Christ is risen.

And his own friends don't recognize him?

The stranger begins to tell them how foolish they are and "slow of heart." I love that turn of a phrase. They are slow of heart to believe even the things that Jesus had been teaching them, and this stranger opens scripture and begins to teach them from Moses and the Prophets about how their Messiah might not have been a fraud after all. The disciples invite this stranger to stay with them as nightfall is approaching, which he does. He joins them for dinner, and when he breaks bread with them, their eyes are opened and they recognize that it has been Jesus all along. When they figure out who it is, POOF, he vanishes.

Jesus Christ is risen.

And with one flick of the cape, he vanishes from the room.

Well those who had been on the road get up and go back to Jerusalem, where they find the other eleven disciples. When they do, they hear from the Jerusalem crowd, “Jesus is risen, INDEED, and he has appeared to Simon!” So they tell what had happened to them on the road and how they knew him in the breaking of bread.

Jesus is risen.

Simon says, he is risen indeed.

Well, I must say it takes the gospel narrative a bit to get to a solid affirmation of this story. We, today, seem a bit more sure of ourselves, at least on Easter Sunday morning. Our Easter greeting, “Jesus Christ is Risen” is bold and assured, an enthusiastic proclamation of the Gospel to be sure – but what makes that particular news a message fit to bring salvation to humankind?

More than a century ago, before it was cool and everyone was doing it, the Presbyterian Church worked on its own mission and vision statement. “What exactly does it mean to be the Christian Church in the world?” those Presbyterians wondered, and they came up with 6 statements they called the “Great Ends of the Church.” The first goal or end of the church is the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. That particular tenet of the church’s mission and ministry popped into my mind as I was reading through Luke’s telling of Jesus’ death and resurrection this year for our Easter readings. And it helped me to note that the earliest of Jesus’ followers had their own struggles proclaiming that the resurrection happened, let alone what it all would mean for future followers. Luke wasn’t trying to hide the disbelief of the women’s story, the mis-identification of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, a suspicious disappearing act, or the need to

confirm the story among all accounts in order to “make it so.” Rather, he wrote all these things down as crucial TO THE STORY. The Gospel proclamation that Jesus is not here, he is risen, doesn’t need blind devotion for it to “work” so to speak. In fact, I wonder if it’s better kept in a mysterious place, a place more about wonder and amazement than about doctrinal affirmations or absolute certainty.

Though I tend to think of proclaiming the gospel as telling the whole story of Jesus, much gets laid upon this last week as marking the uniqueness of the gospel message. Is the good news that Jesus died for us, or that he lives again? Is it that our sins are erased or that death no longer has its sting? Is it that believers of this story get to go to heaven or that the evil forces in this world don’t get to have the final say over love? Which part of this story touches humanity with a sense of salvation? For me, they all do.

Salvation is one of those religious words that can take some doing to unpack. In its biblical context – it has to do with healing or wholeness, of making things right in a hurting world. Over time it has come to mean that God will take it easy on sinners who believe and repent. It has come to mean a ticket to heaven that comes from proclaiming Easter truth with unwavering faith.

But I think if we, in the current context of being the church, wish to harken back to this mission goal and get serious about the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind, that its going to be less about pronouncing the “specialness” of the Christian believer, and getting more serious about how we proclaim a “good news” story in a world where healing and wholeness can seem to be far from reachable goals. But it kind of surprises me to hear myself say that, and here’s why. In those times when I have been in the position of moderating discussions about mission and vision goals, I’m one who is always on the ready to point out when a goal seems too broad, too all-encompassing to really mean much. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation

of humankind – well that’s one of those goals that tends to sit on shelves and gather dust because the target audience seems far too broad. Humankind? Really? Way to think of yourselves a bit highly 20th century Presbyterians. This isn’t creating the market demographic for a denomination or studying the context for a church plant. This is saying that our goal is to tell an ancient story, on repeat, until it brings a message of love and hope to all the people in all corners of the world, everywhere.

But this is a Church, capital C goal, I take it. Not just a Presbyterian one or a congregational one. It says that together we are the caretakers of a story that has the potential power to save actual human lives. Maybe that’s why we try to put it in tiny boxes and say that there’s only one right way to do it. If this story really has that kind of unleashed power in the world, we would have no control over it, we could no longer harness it in the church or by the church, it would be cut loose in the world and might go through expressions that we think of as idle tales or misidentification. The Jesus that we know might disappear or might be walking right beside us without our even knowing. But another aspect of the good news is that when we read about those early days, when the love of the resurrection was cut loose in the world – there was no control over it – the feelings were strange and went through cycles of belief and amazement, shock and wonder. When we tell the story, and our own understandings of it, include the mystery of what you don’t know as well as the proclamation of what you do know. The story won’t lose any power or momentum because of it – in fact – I think it will show its real potential for offering healing when all seems to be lost. Resurrection, life beyond death, through death, around death does that.

One thing we do know is that Jesus taught about the ever-present love of God, and he bore that out in his teaching, in his death, and in his resurrection. When we hear this story, we are changed. When we tell this story, we are changed. When others see you put this story into action in

your life, maybe they will be curious about what motivates you to live a life of hope in the shadow of a cross. It is a mystery how God works, and through whom God works. How does this story make a difference in your life? How does it save you? I'm not sure any of us can tell this story to the broad category of humankind unless we see what it has done within first. It's not a 'say it' and make it so kind of story. It's one that has to grab you, and turn you around, or hold you and tell you its going to be ok, or cry with you and let you know your tears are not yours alone. That's where the salvation comes, and humankind is better off for it. Amen.