

Luke 24:36-49

1 Corinthians 15:1-22

April 8, 2018

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

OF FIRST IMPORTANCE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Here's a little book I picked up a few years ago that is quite an interesting read. [Show N.T. Wright's 817 page book *The Resurrection of the Son of God.*] Don't worry! Today's sermon about what Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead means for us won't be quite as long! I would like to share Dr. Wright's opening paragraphs with you to set the stage. He writes:

“The pilgrim who visits the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem faces several puzzles. Is this after all the place where Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and buried? Why is it inside the city walls, not outside as one had supposed? How does the present building relate to the original site? How did the place come to be so different from what the New Testament leads us to expect (a garden with a tomb in it, close to a hill called Golgotha)? And, even supposing this is roughly the right place, is this the right *spot*? Is this rocky outcrop, now enclosed within an upstairs chapel, actually the top of Golgotha? Is this marble slab really where the dead Jesus was laid? Is this highly ornate shrine really the site of the tomb? And — a different sort of question, but a pressing one for many visitors — why are different groups of Christians still squabbling about who owns the place? These puzzles, though, do not noticeably affect the appeal of the place. Despite archaeological, historical and ecclesiastical squabbles, the church retains its evocative and spiritual power. Pilgrims still flock to it in their hundreds of thousands.

“Some of them still question whether it all really happened. Did Jesus of Nazareth, they ask, really rise from the dead? Whether or not they realize it, they join a different throng on a different pilgrimage: the jostling, over-heated crowd of historians investigating the strange reports of events at the tomb of Jesus on the third day following his execution. Here they are confronted with a similar set of problems. The story of Easter, like the church at its supposed location, has been demolished and reconstructed again and again over the years. The tantalizing narratives in the gospels are as puzzling to the reader as the building is to the visitor. How do they fit together, if at all? What precisely happened? Which school of thought today, if any, is telling the story truly? Many have despaired of discovering what, if anything, happened on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion. Yet, despite perplexity and skepticism, billions of Christians around the world regularly repeat the original confession of Easter faith: on the third day after his execution, Jesus rose again.”¹

Look at the cartoon in today's bulletin. My good friend Lloyd Braswell, pastor of the Chester Baptist Church in Chester, VA posted it on Facebook this past week. Who is the disciple doing the talking? I figure it has to be Peter. Notice the expressions on

the other disciples' faces and the cup dropping to the ground. I love this cartoon for two reasons, and they are based on what Peter says — “I know he was really special. But dead men don't come back. He's standing behind me, isn't he . . .”

“But dead men don't come back. . .” It's tempting to think that we 21st century human beings are more skeptical and sophisticated than gullible and superstitious 1st century people. We think “Dead is dead,” but for some reason believe they didn't think the same. Actually, 1st century people in Palestine probably had a much more realistic, immediate understanding of death than we do. They were very familiar with people dying, and understood what happened after someone died. When Jesus commanded that the stone be rolled away from Lazarus' tomb, Martha, Lazarus' sister, tried to warn him off. The King James Version puts it most graphically: “Jesus said, ‘Take ye away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, ‘Lord, by this time he stinketh, for he hath been dead four days.’” (John 11:39) Remember, when Mary and the other women went to Jesus' tomb early on the first day of the week, they went there to take care of a dead body, not to celebrate the resurrection.

Peter's other comment in the cartoon — “He's standing behind me, isn't he . . .” is a good description of how Jesus' disciples and other followers knew he was alive. It wasn't because of an empty tomb or neatly folded graveclothes. No, it was because Jesus met them where they were and, even if they didn't recognize him at first, they soon came to know the living person in front of them was the same person they had seen hanging dead on the cross on Friday afternoon. Mary in the garden — the disciples in a locked room — Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus — Peter and some of the other disciples in the boat by the lakeshore — they all met the living, risen Jesus in person.

That is the apostle Paul's point as he begins his great resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians 15. He begins by proclaiming the core of the gospel and our faith — “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.” Then Paul lists all of the people who saw the risen Lord, and he introduces that list of witnesses with the same language he uses to talk about the Lord's Supper: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received . . .” The list is quite impressive: Cephas (Peter), the twelve, more than 500 brothers and sisters (many of whom were still alive), James, then to all the apostles. “Last of all,” Paul writes, “as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:5-10)

Go back to Peter's first comment in the cartoon — “I know he was really special. But dead men don't come back . . .” This past Wednesday we marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. WECT-TV had an interesting program that night, from Williston High School in Wilmington. Frances Weller interviewed several Wilmington residents about their reactions to Dr. King's murder. To a person, they talked about how Dr. King inspired them — then and now — and how they

hoped his dream and commitment to non-violent change can be kept alive, especially among the younger generations.

Through the centuries, some people, especially in modern times, have tried to make the case that the meaning of Jesus Christ's resurrection is only spiritual. In other words, his disciples and first followers had some sort of meaningful spiritual experience with Jesus, particularly in light of his noble death. However, the idea of the resurrection from the dead means nothing more than people trying to keep Jesus' teaching and example alive from generation to generation.

Of course, many people have dismissed the idea of Jesus' resurrection as nothing more than a made-up story concocted by the disciples. Which is just another way of saying, it's a big lie! You may remember Chuck Colson, once known as President Nixon's "hatchet man." He was the first member of the Nixon administration to go to jail on Watergate-related charges. In 1973, he became a Christian and lived the rest of his life working with prison ministries. Chuck Colson had an interesting perspective on Christ's resurrection: "I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because twelve men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for forty years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled twelve of the most powerful men in the world — and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me twelve apostles could keep a lie for forty years? Absolutely impossible!"

When Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth, he laid out for them the most important essence of the gospel: Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; he was buried; and he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. That is of first importance — for Paul, for all of the witnesses he lists, and for all of us who call ourselves Easter people today. The main issue Paul is addressing is found in v. 12: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?" It's not that the Corinthians were questioning whether or not Jesus was really raised from the dead. Good for him! But they seem to be wondering, what's that got to do with us? And that's a good question.

Paul's arguments sound very philosophical and logical . . . full of "if/then" statements, as if he is trying to "prove" the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. But that's not really what Paul is doing. Instead, he points out to the Corinthian believers the domino effect of saying there is no resurrection of the dead.

Think about your own hopes and dreams for this life and beyond. Think about your loved ones who have died believing in Christ. Think about the promises God has made to us in Jesus Christ, not just for the life to come but for this life now (remember, Jesus told Martha, "I **am** the resurrection and the life . . ."). Think about how your life would be different if it is not true that there is a resurrection of the dead and that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

If it's true that there is no resurrection of the dead, then Jesus has not been raised. And if Jesus has not been raised, we are liars, because we have been saying that God raised Jesus from the dead. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then all of

our hopes and dreams and faith are in vain, good for nothing. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, all of our loved ones who died believing in Christ are lost and we are still in our sins. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our hope extends only throughout this earthly life and, Paul says, “we are of all people most to be pitied.”

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” What are we going to do with that good news? Is it just a shapeless, vague hope for a better future or our own personal ticket to heaven? Does Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead make a difference in your life today? If so, how? And why?

On Thursday, our presbytery’s Commission on Ministry met here at WPC. The moderator, Rev. Tim Havlicek from Morehead City, shared a devotion about being at the tomb. His opening remarks were very similar to how N.T. Wright begins his book on the resurrection. Tim talked about visiting the Holy Land and being somewhat put off by the commercialization and competing claims about where exactly Jesus’ tomb is/was located. However, Tim said, despite all of that, he could sense the amazement and the power and the significance of being in the area where Jesus was laid to rest on Friday and was raised up on Sunday. Then Tim asked us to pair up and share with each other our experiences “at the tomb.” How have we encountered death? And what difference does the resurrection make in our lives when we find ourselves “at the tomb,” either literally by a graveside or figuratively when we go through very difficult and seemingly hopeless times? Finally, Tim challenged us, encouraged us, and charged us to live as people of the resurrection in everything we do.

In his book *Whistling in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner writes this about Easter, “If the Gospel writers had wanted to tell it in a way to convince the world that Jesus indeed rose from the dead, they would presumably have done it with all the skill and fanfare they could muster. Here there is no skill, no fanfare. They seem to be telling it simply the way it was. The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself. When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt . . . He rose. A few saw him briefly and talked to him. If it is true, there is nothing left to say. If it is not true, there is nothing left to say. For believers and unbelievers both, life has never been the same again. For some, neither has death.”²

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead!

Great is the mystery of our faith: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again!

What difference does that make in your life?

Let us pray: Praise be to you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for your great mercy in giving us birth into a new life and a new hope by raising Jesus Christ from the dead. Praise be to you, our God and Father, for an inheritance that can never spoil or fade, kept for us in heaven. O

God, to you be all praise, glory, and honor through Jesus Christ, your Son, our risen Lord and Savior. Amen.

NOTES

¹N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

²Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), p. 42.