

Luke 24:1-12
April 17, 2022

Luke 24:13-35, focused on verses 33-35
Easter Sunday/Day of Resurrection

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

THE LORD HAS RISEN INDEED!

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.

At the first of last week, I was in the thick of Holy Week worship planning. The folks at the Grove Presbyterian Church in Kenansville asked me to lead their Maundy Thursday service, so on Monday I planned the service and emailed the information to an elder; then on Tuesday morning I wrote my communion meditation for that service. As soon as I finished writing that, I worked on my message for the early Easter service that was held this morning at First Baptist Church. On Wednesday, Karla, Bill, Cheryl, and I were exchanging texts and emails left and right, double-checking worship information for our Good Friday service and this morning's Easter celebration. Wednesday afternoon I wrote this Easter message.

In the midst of planning and writing four Holy Week services, I received an email from Nancy in her role as the Mission Coordinator of the East Community of the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina. She sent it to all of the ministers she works with from Carteret County in the north to Brunswick County in the south, from Wrightsville Beach in the east to Wallace in the west. Her email said, "The attached is not a prayer I wrote, but it is a prayer I'm praying for all of you this week." Here is the prayer she attached, written by Brian McLaren:

Dear Lord, I pray for all the pastors today
Who will feel enormous pressure to have their sermon
Match the greatness of the subject
And will surely feel they have failed.
(I pray even more for those who think they have succeeded.)
Help them to know that it is enough
Simply and faithfully to tell the story
Of women in dawn hush ...
Of men running half-believing ...
Of rolled stones and folded grave-clothes ...
Of a supposed gardener saying the name of a crying woman ...
Of sad walkers encountering a stranger on the road home ...
Of an empty tomb and overflowing hearts.
Give them the wisdom to know that sincere humility and awe
Surpass all homiletic flourish
On this day of mysterious hope beyond all words.
Make them less conscious of their responsibility to preach,

And more confident of the Risen Christ
Whose presence trumps all efforts to proclaim it.
Considering all the Easter choirs who will sing beautifully,
and those who won't,
And all the Easter prayers that will soar in faith,
and those that will stumble and flounder,
And all the Easter attendance numbers and offering numbers
that will exceed expectations
And those that will disappoint ...
I pray they all will be surpassed by the simple joy
Of women and men standing in the presence of women and men,
Daring to proclaim and echo the good news;
Risen indeed! Alleluia!
For death is not the last word.
Violence is not the last word.
Hate is not the last word.
Money is not the last word.
Intimidation is not the last word.
Political power is not the last word.
Condemnation is not the last word.
Betrayal and failure are not the last word.
No, all of them are left like rags in a tomb,
And from that tomb,
Arises Christ,
Alive.
Help the preachers feel it,
And if they don't feel it, help them
Preach it anyway, allowing themselves
To be the receivers as well
as the bearers of the Easter News.
Alleluia!

Let me be the bearer of the Easter News, in the company of the two men in dazzling clothes in the empty tomb and the eleven disciples and their companions gathered together in Jerusalem –

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. The Lord has risen indeed!”

Some of you have heard me tell this story before, but here goes. When Nancy and I served as co-pastors of the Stanley White Presbyterian Church in Roanoke Rapids, NC, the congregation gathered on the front lawn of the church in the dark and welcomed Easter Sunday as the sun rose. Then we would gather in the Fellowship Hall for a hearty breakfast. One Easter morning, Elder Harry Bright came up to me in the Fellowship Hall and said, “Happy Easter, Phil!” I said, “Happy Easter, Harry! Today is

my favorite day of the year.” He said, “Christmas is my favorite day of the year. If Jesus hadn’t been born, we wouldn’t have Easter.” I said, “That’s true, but if Jesus hadn’t been raised from the dead, Christmas wouldn’t matter.” Harry said, “I suppose you’re right – but Christmas is still my favorite day of the year. Let’s eat!”

In his great resurrection chapter 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul makes a similar argument about the importance of Jesus Christ being raised from the dead: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, 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.” (1 Corinthians 15:12-20)

In the company of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were with them at the tomb early that Sunday morning and went to tell the apostles, and in the company of the eleven apostles – Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and their companions gathered together with them, let me dare to proclaim and echo the good news:

“He is not here, but has risen. The Lord has risen indeed!”

Every Easter Sunday, Christians around the world greet one another with the ancient and traditional call and response: “Christ is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” There is a tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church that the saying was made popular by Mary Magdalene when she supposedly addressed Emperor Tiberius in Rome with the words “Christ is risen.”

According to one source, “Using this address should be more than an empty tradition. The words ‘He is risen!’ remind us of the joyous news we celebrate at Easter, that Jesus’ death was not in vain, and that He has the power to overcome death. Saying ‘He is risen!’ allows us to share this incredible truth with each other. The resurrection of Christ gives us hope for salvation and for our own resurrection and eternal life.”¹

“The Lord is risen indeed!” “This incredible truth” – this impossible to believe truth; this difficult to believe truth; this extraordinary truth; and, ultimately, this amazingly good truth. When the women dared to proclaim and echo the good news, “He is not here, but has risen,” the apostles found it impossible to believe because it was so extraordinary and amazing. But, before we criticize the eleven apostles for their “unbelief,” let’s consider our own reaction to the Easter News. In light of the way things are in the world today, can we really believe the good news that “The Lord has risen indeed”? Or is it just wishful thinking that is quickly squelched by the “reality” of the way things really are?

In his thoughts on the Easter story in Luke's gospel, Craig Koester asks us to consider the following about hearing the Easter News that challenges the apparent certainties of life and death: "The Easter message says, 'Really? How can you be so sure?' Death is real, but it is not final. In Jesus, life gets the last word. The Easter message calls you from your old belief in death to a new belief in life. The claim that the tomb could not hold Jesus, and the idea that the one who died by crucifixion has not risen is so outrageous that it might make you wonder whether it might – just might – be true. The apostles seemed convinced that the message was nonsense, nothing more than 'an idle tale.' Death was death. Yet the message was so outrageous that Peter had to go and take a look for himself. He had to wonder, 'What if it is true?'"

He continues (and I've edited his pronouns to include all of us), "Those [of us] who gather for worship on Easter Sunday follow in the footsteps of Peter. [We] have heard the rumor that Jesus is alive and come to hear for [our]selves: 'What if it is true? What if death is real, but not final? What if Jesus is not merely past but present? What if Jesus were to meet me here? What would life be then?'"

Koester then extends this challenge, but it's really more of an invitation: "The Easter story continues . . . as God continues to challenge the certainty of death with the promise of life. Go ahead and tell God that you think it is outrageous to expect anyone to believe that Jesus has risen. Go ahead and tell God that you simply believe that death gets the final word. None of this is news to God. He has heard it all before. He simply refuses to believe it. 'Why do you seek the living among the dead?' God wonders. 'Through the living Jesus I give you the gift of life. Why would you think that I would offer you anything less?'"²

On this Easter Sunday,

May we all be surpassed by the simple joy
Of women and men standing in the presence of women and men,
Daring to proclaim and echo the good news;
Risen indeed! Alleluia!
For death is not the last word.
Violence is not the last word.
Hate is not the last word.
Money is not the last word.
Intimidation is not the last word.
Political power is not the last word.
Condemnation is not the last word.
Betrayal and failure are not the last word.
No, all of them are left like rags in a tomb,
And from that tomb,
Arises Christ,
Alive.

"Alleluia! The Lord has risen, indeed!" That is the last word!

Let us pray: Eternal God, we praise you that you have brought us into this Day of Resurrection. We rejoice that the grave could not hold your Son, that he has conquered death, and that he is our risen, living Lord. By your Spirit, lift us from doubt and despair, that our lives may be signs of his resurrection life. We celebrate this day: Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

NOTES

¹ Where does the saying “He is risen; He is risen, indeed!” come from? at www.gotquestions.org.

² Craig R. Koester, “Commentary on Luke 24:1-12, April 4, 2010,” at www.workingpreacher.org.