

DISBELIEVING AND WONDERING IN OUR JOY

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.

“Well, of course, they would believe in the resurrection. They didn’t understand the laws of physics as we do today.”

A few years ago, I showed a video to an “Introduction to the New Testament” class at the University of Mount Olive on a Thursday night. The video was about the Jewish and New Testament understanding of resurrection. In the video, the narrator talked about how we “modern” people sometimes belittle the first century believers with comments such the one I just made. The narrator’s response was wonderful, “People in the first century understood death just as well as we do today. They knew that when a body died, it didn’t typically turn around, get up, and dance around, and live again. It doesn’t take a Ph.D. in nuclear science to understand this.”

We can look in the Bible itself and see that first century people understood death just as well as we do today. Maybe they understood death even **better** than we do in the 21st century. When Jesus stood in front of the tomb where the body of his friend, Lazarus, had been laid, he said, “Take away the stone.” The New Revised Standard Version translates Martha’s response this way: “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” The King James Version is a bit more blunt and graphic. “Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, ‘Lord, by this time he stinketh; for he hath been dead four days.’”

About twenty-five years after Jesus died and was raised again from the dead, the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about Christ’s resurrection from the dead and about the resurrection body. Paul tried to help those early believers come to terms with the meaning of the resurrection for their lives, not just for Jesus himself. With one of the most poignant sentences in the whole Bible, Paul tells those Christians what it would mean if Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead affected **only** him: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Cor. 15:19)

As we heard Lydia read this morning, Paul quickly follows up that thought with this affirmation, “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” (1 Cor. 15:20) The people of the first century A.D. must not have been too different from us today when it came to wondering about life and death and the idea that someone might be resurrected from the dead. As if he anticipates the Corinthians’ next question, Paul writes, “But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’” (1 Cor. 15:35) Paul uses the example of planting a seed of wheat in the ground, and watching something completely different

looking come up. The wheat seed and the wheat stalk are the same, right? But they're different, right? "So it is with the resurrection of the body . . . It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Cor. 15:36-38, 42-43)

Maybe that's why the disciples were terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost. Maybe that's why Mary didn't recognize the risen Jesus by the tomb, and thought he was the gardener. Maybe that's why the two men on the road to Emmaus didn't know who it was who was walking and talking with them. Maybe that's why the disciples in the boat weren't sure who was calling to them from the beach in the early morning light. Maybe it's because they weren't looking for the living among the dead. Or, as Fred Craddock said about the disciples' reaction in this story from the gospel of Luke, "We might say that the disciples thought they were encountering the dead, not the living."¹

I wonder if the same thing can't be said about us much of the time. Maybe we don't recognize Jesus in our midst because we're not looking for the living Lord in the midst of death and suffering. We come to worship. We work hard in the church. We try to live good lives. We even believe and claim Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives. But, when it comes right down to it, how often do we find ourselves thinking about Jesus as a good man, a great teacher, a noble martyr, an outstanding moral example — but not as the risen, living Lord with whom we can have a living, powerful, and loving relationship? How often do we let the very real pain and suffering and death of life blind us to the good news and promise of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead?

Two weeks later, people are still talking about our Easter celebration here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church — how we had to put out extra chairs; how we ran out of communion elements for the first time ever; how the majestic music brought such a sense of joy and celebration. Easter Sunday **was** an affirmation of hope and promise as we joined our voices and sang "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia! Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia! Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia! Suffer to redeem our loss, Alleluia!" We affirmed what we believe with these great words from Romans 8:38-39: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

But let me ask you this: What difference does our celebration two weeks ago of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead make for you this morning? What difference is that celebration — and not just our celebration of the resurrection, but the good news itself that Christ is alive — going to make for us as a congregation in the weeks and months to come? What difference will the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ make in our lives and, even more important than that, in the lives of other people because of our witness?

A book called *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide* has been a great help in my ministry in the last few years. In his book, Howard Rice writes, "Because people know that the experience of God's nearness can bring both distress and power, their relationship with God is always somewhat ambiguous. While drawn to that relationship, they resist."

While seeking a closer sense of God, they want to keep God at a safe and comfortable distance.”² Luke hints at that in this gospel story when he tells us that in their joy at being in the presence of the risen Jesus, the disciples were disbelieving and still wondering. (Luke 24:41) How often we are so much like those disciples in the presence of the crucified and risen Lord. How often we are so much like those disciples in response to Jesus’ calling in our lives. We are disbelieving and still wondering, even in the midst of our joy.

When I teach the gospels in the college survey courses, I always spend time with the students exploring the ends of the four gospels. How Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John finish their stories about Jesus is just as important as how they begin their stories and what comes in between. Think about it. At the end of the gospels,

* Mark tells us, “So [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8)

* Matthew tells us, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” (Matthew 28:16-17)

* Luke tells us, “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” (Luke 24:10-11) Later, “in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering . . .” (Luke 24:41)

* John tells us, “Thomas said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’” (John 20:25) John also tells us that three times Jesus asked Peter, who had denied him three times, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Terror, amazement, fear, doubt, wonder, skepticism — if these stories were at the **very** ends of the four gospels, we would be, in the words of the apostle Paul, “of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Cor. 15:19) But we can give thanks that, like those disciples in all four gospels, we have God’s promised power that comes in the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus.

* Jesus didn’t say to those women who fled from the tomb, “O you foolish women! Go away, I’ll find somebody else to do what I asked you to do!” No, the women became the first evangelists — the first “bearers of good news” — of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. And what a difference their witness made!

* Jesus didn’t separate the sheep from the goats up on the mountain in Galilee and say, “OK guys, all of you who worshiped me, stand over there. Y’all who doubted, get out of my sight!” No, “**they** worshiped him, but some doubted,” and Jesus sent **all** of them out with the Great Commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

* Jesus didn’t reject the disciples who were disbelieving and still wondering,

even in their joy. Instead, he told them, “You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:48-49)

* Jesus didn’t scratch Thomas and Simon Peter off his list of disciples and witnesses, despite their demands and denials. Instead, he accepted Thomas’ declaration of faith and commissioned Simon Peter, “Feed my sheep.” (John 20:28; 21:17)

What difference does the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead make in your life and mine and for our church? Two weeks after Easter — 2000 years after the first Easter — do we think we are encountering the dead instead of the living Lord Jesus Christ? If we open ourselves to what God the Father has promised — the power of God’s Holy Spirit, the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead — our living Lord Jesus will lead us where he wants us to go. If we follow where our living Lord Jesus leads us, even if we find ourselves disbelieving and wondering in our joy, we will not go there alone.

We sang about Christ’s call to us still today:

*We walk by faith and not by sight;
with gracious words draw near,
O Christ, who spoke as none e’er spoke:
“My peace be with you here.”*

*We may not touch your hands and side,
nor follow where you trod;
but in you promise we rejoice and cry,
“My Lord and God!”*

*Help then, O Lord, our unbelief;
and may our faith abound
to call on you when you are near
and seek where you are found.*

*And when our life of faith is done,
in realms of clearer light
may we behold you as you are,
with full and endless sight.³*

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, you give us all good things. You give us life and love. We give you thanks and praise for the mystery of your suffering love that gives us life. We give you thanks and praise that all our dying and living is held in your grace and love; through Jesus Christ, the Risen One. Amen.

NOTES

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 289.

²Howard Rice, *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998).

³*Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, Hymn #817, “We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight” by Henry Alford (text) and Samuel McFarland (music).