

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Luke 24:1-12

April 9, 2023

Easter Sunday/Day of Resurrection

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

**A GOSPEL ITINERARY FOR LENT: THE TOMB AGAIN
The Non-Sense of the Resurrection**

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.

More than thirty years ago, some church members invited me and Nancy to go with them to see a Holy Week outdoor drama. The play portrayed the events from Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the resurrection one week later on Easter Sunday. The play was advertised as an "outdoor drama taken directly from the scriptures." The production was impressive and played to an audience of almost 2,000 people. The drama included a large cast of characters, detailed costumes, animals, and music. The high point of the play, of course, was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The music swelled, the stone was rolled away, a blinding light shone from the tomb, and Jesus walked out of the tomb, dressed in a brilliant, white robe. At that point, I leaned over and whispered in Nancy's ear, "That's impressive, but it's not in the Bible!"

Now, I'm not really a cynic and I appreciate the effort that went into putting on such a production in order to share the good news of the resurrection. But, if we're really going to take something "directly from the scriptures," we shouldn't add anything that isn't in the scriptures, even something as marvelous as Jesus being raised from the dead on Easter Sunday. After all, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John didn't find it necessary to include vivid descriptions of Jesus emerging from the tomb in the early morning light. When the apostle Paul wrote about the resurrection, he also didn't describe the event itself. Instead, the gospel writers and Paul seem much more interested in what comes **after** Jesus was raised from the dead.

In an article about Luke's Easter story, Craig Koester notes that "the women receive a word that runs counter to what they know to be true. 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.' One might be tempted to linger over the description of these angelic messengers, but they are not the point. The focus in this section is on the message, not the messengers. What is most striking is that the women encounter the resurrection through this message. They are *told* that Jesus has risen, but they do not see the risen Jesus himself. What they have is a word, a message."

Koester continues, "This brings the Easter experience uncomfortably close, because this is precisely what we have – the word of resurrection. One would think God would work differently. It would seem so much easier to have the women come to the tomb and watch Jesus walk out into the light of a new day. And it would seem much

easier for Jesus simply to appear in dazzling glory to us, who gather on an Easter morning generations later. And this is precisely where our situation is like that of the women on that first Easter: we are all given a message of resurrection, which flies in the face of what we know is true.”¹

A friend asked me this week, “Why did you pick Luke’s Easter story to preach on? Do you just rotate through the gospels over the years?” I told him that when I planned my preaching for Lent and Easter I had a reason for picking Luke’s story, but I couldn’t remember what the reason was! But, yes, I do try to preach from the different Easter stories year to year to year to year. Last Monday, as I started working through this most familiar story and wondering what Easter message I might preach today, Luke 24:11 almost jumped off the page at me. Here’s how I translated that verse: “And these words seemed in their judgment to be nonsense/empty talk, and they refused to believe them.” And those words the women told the disciples can be summed up this way: “He is not here, but has been raised.”

Perhaps you’ve always heard that the reason the disciples (who were men) thought the words were an “idle tale” was because it was women who were reporting to them. But I don’t think that’s what Luke has in mind here. After all, the women are sharing exactly what the two men in dazzling clothes (that means they were God’s messengers) had told them. Which means that the women preached the first Easter sermon in history!

No, I think the disciples heard the women’s message as “nonsense” because they just couldn’t wrap their minds around the news, despite the fact that Jesus himself had told them at least three times that he was going to be raised from the dead. I very rarely have my sermon title ready on a Monday morning, but I did this week. But then I wondered whether I really wanted to have our sign out front proclaiming to the whole community, “The Nonsense of the Resurrection.” Can’t you just imagine what people would be saying about us Presbyterians? That’s why “Non-sense” has a hyphen. Maybe, just maybe, that hyphen might make people riding by and the rest of us pause long enough to think about what we are actually celebrating today.

I did a word study on “nonsense” and began by breaking the word down into its two parts: “non” and “sense.” Obviously, “non” means “not, other, the reverse of, or the absence of.” “Sense” can mean “to perceive by the senses” and “the conscious awareness or rationality.” When you put the two together, you get a word – nonsense – that can mean “language, conduct, or an idea that is absurd or contrary to good sense; language that cannot be understood because it does not mean anything.”

Again, Craig Koester comments, “The only logical response to such a message – [“He is not here, but has been raised.” “Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!”] – is unbelief. Experience teaches that death wins. The Easter message says that Jesus lives. When such contradictory claims collide, it only makes sense to continue affirming what we already know . . . Yet here is where the Easter message begins its work, by challenging our certainties. Experience teaches that death wins and that even the strongest succumb to it. Experience teaches that life is what you make it, so get what you can while you can because it will be over soon enough. And the Easter message

says, ‘Really? How can you be so sure?’ Death is real, but it is not final. In Jesus, life gets the final word.”²

But it can surely seem as if death has the final word, can’t it? As I was working on this Easter sermon earlier this week and talking with folks about Jesus’ resurrection and what it means for us today, I was also meeting with Curt and Vera and Rev. Hank Bellomy to plan Mr. Simpson’s funeral service on Wednesday. I was also texting and talking with Judy Robinson’s son as we made plans for her graveside service next week and her memorial service here in the sanctuary at the end of the month. And, of course, you’ve all been reading and listening to the news about natural disasters and accidents and war and suffering and people dying – or you’re dealing with the challenges of life with your loved ones and in your own lives.

So, even as we gather for Easter Sunday worship to celebrate the good news – the “non-sense,” if you will – of the resurrection of Jesus, we might still wonder, as some of the Corinthian Christians apparently did, “Well, good for Jesus, but what does his resurrection have to do with us?” Today’s Affirmation of Faith, which is taken from the 16th century Heidelberg Catechism, is a reflection on just what Jesus’ resurrection means for us. “*How does Christ’s resurrection benefit us?* First, by his resurrection he has overcome death, so that he might make us share in the righteousness he won for us by his death. Second, by his power we too are already now resurrected to a new life. Third, Christ’s resurrection is a guarantee of our glorious resurrection. This is our faith and hope. Alleluia! Amen!”

A couple of weeks ago, we heard the story about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Before the dead man walked out of that tomb (reported in somewhat gory detail by John), Jesus told his sister, Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said, “Of course he will, some day off in the future, when all of the dead are raised.” And Jesus said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26) Right here, right now, Martha!

Again, Craig Koester brings the resurrection to bear on your life and mine: “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 now 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?’³

What if it is true? If the resurrection sounds like “non-sense” it’s not because it’s not true. It’s because the resurrection comes from the purpose, power, love, and will of God and is not something we can make happen. The resurrection is not something that this world provides as an option. The great 20th century Reformed theologian Karl Barth once said, “The gospel [by which we can also understand the resurrection] is not a natural *therefore* but a miraculous *nevertheless*.” Resurrection – Jesus’ on the first Easter and our own some day – is not the natural result of life and death, but the extraordinary gift of God, the “non-sense” of life after death, the miraculous

nevertheless to any and every experience we have that wants us to believe that death has the final word.

We've all been warned that "if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." Usually that's pretty good advice, but not when it comes to the Easter message. In fact, God's "non-sense" of the resurrection – which, according to the "reality" of our lives sounds "too good to be true" -- is our surest and greatest hope, our comfort in life and in death. Death was no stranger to the disciples and death is no stranger to us, 2000 years later. *Nevertheless*, we can trust that the message the women heard – "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has been raised" – is just as true today as it was on that first Easter Sunday morning. And maybe, just maybe, that's why the message of the resurrection can sometimes sound like nonsense.

I wasn't sure I was going to share this story, but I can't resist. In a 2001 article in *The Christian Century* called "Empty tomb, empty talk," Tom Long, professor emeritus of preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, wrote, "Maybe the news of Easter was simply too overwhelming for them to believe." Then he shared this story: "Many years ago, a friend told me that his young son was a great fan of both Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. The boy faithfully watched both of their television shows, and one day it was announced that Mister Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. [NOTE: Actually, Captain Kangaroo visited Mister Rogers' neighborhood on April 27, 1970. Near the end of the show, Captain Kangaroo had to leave because Mr. Green Jeans had prepared a dinner for him back at the Treasure House.]

"The boy was ecstatic. Both of his heroes, together on the same show! Every morning the boy would ask, 'Is it today that Mister Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?' Finally the great day arrived, and the whole family gathered around the television. There they were, Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo together. The boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly, got up and wandered from the room. Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, 'What is it, son? Is anything wrong?' The boy replied, 'It's too good. It's just too good.'"⁴

He is not here, but has been raised! It's too good. It's just too good. Nevertheless, God's "non-sense" of the resurrection is what makes sense of everything else in life.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!

Happy Easter!

Let us pray: Almighty God, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, you broke open the gates of hell, and destroyed sin and death. By his resurrection you raised the dead, and brought us from death to life. By his resurrection you proclaimed good news to the women and apostles, and brought salvation to the world. God of mercy, we no longer look for Jesus among the dead, for he is alive and has become the Lord of life. Increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ, and help us to grow as your people toward the fullness of eternal life with you, through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

NOTES

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

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Thomas G. Long, "Empty tomb, empty talk: Easter Sunday, April 15, Luke 24:1-12," April 4, 2001 at www.christiancentury.org.