



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## He is Risen

### Luke 24:1-12

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Last week we read St. Luke's account of Jesus' death and burial. As Jesus was dying his friends, Luke says, were standing at a distance, afraid to get too close lest someone recognise them as his friends and disciples. They were grieving the death of Jesus, but they were also afraid. One wrong move and they might end up crucified too.

It's hard for us to imagine what they were feeling. It's hard for us to imagine the sadness, the hopelessness, and the despair—probably even a good bit of anger—that they were feeling. We all know the story. *We* know it doesn't end at the cross on Good Friday. *We* know it doesn't end with Jesus sealed in the tomb. *We* know that on that first Easter Sunday Jesus rose from the dead. Our annual celebration makes it the biggest feast day of the Church's year. We deck the church out in white and gold and with lilies and we fill it with our joyful praise: "Hail thee, festival day!", "Welcome, happy morning!", "Jesus Christ is ris'n today, Al-le-lu-ia!", and "The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won". But that first Easter morning was very different for Jesus' disciples. Even as they discovered the empty tomb, any thoughts of "happy mornings" or "festival days" or of singing Alleluias were the furthest things from their minds. They certainly weren't thinking that the strife was over or that the battle was done.

So what changed between that first Easter and every other Easter since? We know and understand the story; they did not. You and I can read the story of Jesus dying on Good Friday and we might weep, but we also know

that there Jesus was paying the penalty for human sin. We might weep, but we also know that Jesus rose again on Sunday, conquering sin and death. But Jesus' friends didn't grasp any of that. For them Jesus' crucifixion was a faith-crushing event. The Messiah wasn't supposed to die. Jesus' death was proof to them that he was a fraud, a false prophet, and a false messiah. The questions and the doubts began when Jesus was arrested. That was the moment, Peter thought, when the revolution would begin. He drew his sword and attacked one of the soldiers. But Jesus told him to put his sword away and then healed the injured man. Three times that night Peter denied Jesus in anger. But as long as Jesus was alive there was hope. But as he was mocked, as he was beaten, as he was driven through the streets, with each step that hope faded. And as Jesus died—just as faith dawned in the thief crucified at his side and in the centurion standing guard—the light of faith died in the disciples. Their faith was as dead and buried as was Jesus in the tomb. Even as they went back on Sunday and discovered the empty tomb, there was no excitement, no thrill, no joy. The empty tomb simply compounded their grief with confusion. Even seeing the empty tomb they didn't understand.

We'll pick up the story there, at the beginning of Luke 24. The last chapter ended with Joseph of Arimathea—a respected member of the Sanhedrin—claiming Jesus' body and burying him in his own tomb—a tomb that had never been used. The women went with him. They saw the tomb and its location. Even if they had lost hope in Jesus, they still wanted to give him a proper burial. The Sabbath was beginning so there was nothing they could do until Sunday. They planned to come back to anoint his body with spices and ointments—something they would continue to do for several months—then they would collect his bones and place them in an ossuary. Remember that in the details Luke puts to rest any idea that the women might turn up at

the wrong tomb on Sunday or that Jesus' body might be mistaken for another in the tomb. Luke now goes on:

**But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. (Luke 24:1-3)**

You and I arrive to worship on Easter Morning ready to sing joyfully about the stone rolled away and the empty tomb. Some of our songs even talk about the excitement of the women as they found it. And yet they were anything but excited—or at least not excited in the way we might be. Luke goes on to say that they were "perplexed"—they were confused and upset. An empty tomb is not what they were expecting. They had spent the last hours of Friday preparing spices and ointments for Jesus' body and had been waiting for Sunday morning. The Sabbath was over; they could care for their friend's body now. They didn't head off to the tomb that morning thinking that maybe Jesus had risen from the dead and that they'd find the tomb empty. They hadn't prepared the spices and ointments "just in case" the body was still there. No. They firmly believed Jesus' body would be in the tomb. They knew, just like everybody else in the world, that when a person dies he or she stays dead. This is why Jesus' crucifixion was so faith-crushing. The Messiah was supposed to vindicate the Lord's people and vanquish their enemies. He was most definitely *not* supposed to be humiliated and die at their hands. Up until his death the disciples could still hope that Jesus would finally do what he was supposed to do, but once he was dead—and being wrapped in linen and placed in a tomb made it certain—that was that.

So there was no thought of, no expectation that Jesus might rise from the dead over the weekend. There was

no chance they went to the wrong tomb. They'd been there just two days before. And there was no chance that it was the wrong body missing. Tombs often had more than one body in them, but Joseph of Arimathea's tomb was brand new and never used. Jesus' body was the only body in the tomb. So you can imagine how these women would be perplexed. Imagine how you would feel going to visit the grave of a loved one just two days after their burial and finding it empty. They were wondering if someone had stolen the body. Or maybe Pilate or the Sanhedrin had ordered it taken away to some other place. As if enough hadn't happened already, now this!

Luke goes on in verses 4-7:

**While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."**

The women aren't the only ones there. There are two angels as well. Brothers and Sisters, sometimes it takes divine intervention to drive the truth into our thick and faithless and perplexed heads. That's what happens here. In the midst of the darkness of grief and confusion these two messengers from the kingdom of light appear to the women. In the midst of despair the Lord sends messengers to give hope. And yet there's a bit of a rebuke in the message of the angels. Jesus' friends *should* have known what to expect. They *should* have come expecting the tomb to be empty. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?", they ask the women. And now the women are even more perplexed: "What do you mean? We didn't come here looking

for the living; we came here to anoint our friend who is dead—and most decidedly so. The Romans are experts at making sure their victims are dead—they don't make mistakes—and we saw him ourselves when they put him in the tomb."

But the angel goes on: "He's not here; he's risen. Yes, we know, that prospect never occurred to any of you, but it should have. Don't you remember all the times he told you about rising from the dead? Don't you remember what he told you all the way, back when you first met him in Galilee that he, the Son of Man, must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified *and on the third day rise*?" They should have known. They should have known that Jesus wouldn't be in the tomb on Sunday. They should have known that preparing the spices and ointment was a waste of time, because they should have known that Jesus would be alive again on the third day.

Staring back in Chapter 9 Jesus had been telling them this and it's not like he was subtle about it. In 9:22 he told them:

**"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."**

And think of Jesus' parables. In the story of the Prodigal Son, the father declares that his son was once dead, but is alive again (Luke 15:24, 32) and in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus he condemned the leaders of Israel who were set to reject him:

**"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."** (Luke 16:31)

Jesus' teaching was full of references to both his death and his resurrection. Neither should have been a surprise.

And not only that, but his teaching stressed repeatedly that his death and resurrection were the focal point—even the *essence*—of his ministry. And with this divine intervention—hearing it from the angels—the light *begins* to dawn. In verse 8 Luke writes:

**And they remembered his words...**

And it's not so much that they "remembered", but that they remembered and—with the help of the Lord's angelic intervention and the evidence of the empty tomb—they started hearing Jesus in a new light and understanding dawned on them.

For three years Jesus had been talking about his death and resurrection, but they had never understood. They heard it, but it had never sunk in—just like so many of the other things Jesus said and did. And the reason is that it simply didn't fit their expectation. The result was that they filtered everything Jesus said through those wrong expectations. This ought to serve as a warning to us. We need to ask: How often do we read or hear God's Word, but miss what it's really saying because we've filtered it through our own faulty expectations rather than letting it speak for itself?

Jesus' friends *did* believe in resurrection. Not all Jews did. The Sadducees, for example, denied that there would be a resurrection of the dead. They were conservatives and the idea of resurrection was just too radical for them—it gave people hope for change and a new kind of world. For the Sadducees there was life and then there was the grave. But many Jews, the Pharisees included, believed very firmly that at the end of the age the Messiah would come, that he would defeat Israel's enemies, and raise the righteous to life. In doing that they believed that the Messiah would usher in the "age to come". And this resurrection wasn't some kind of spiritual pie-in-the-sky-when-

you-die idea. It wasn't what a lot of people think of today in terms of the death of the physical body and an eternal disembodied and strictly spiritual existence in heaven. That's more in line with the thinking of many of the pagan Greek philosophers who taught that the material world and the physical body are evil and that death frees our spirits to a higher and better form of existence. No, the Jews believed in a very real and physical resurrection. At the end of history the bodies—not just the souls of, but the actual *bodies*—of all the faithful were to be raised to life again to live with the Messiah in a restored and very much earthly Israelite kingdom. The key point to remember is that they believed this resurrection would happen *at the end of the age*—and at the end of history—and that it would happen to *everyone* at once. This is why all of Jesus' talk of his death and resurrection went over their heads. First, it had never occurred to anyone that the Messiah would die. A dead messiah was a false messiah! But even if it had occurred to them that the Messiah might die, it had also never occurred to anyone that just one person might be resurrected to the new life of the age to come before everyone else. Again, resurrection was supposed to happen to everyone at once and it would usher in a new kingdom—a new world of justice and righteousness and peace. That Jesus would die and that he would then be raised from the dead, all while the Romans and the Herodians and all the other ungodly nations continued to go about their business and run their empires was *completely* off everyone's radar.

This is why it's utter nonsense to think that Jesus' disciple made up this story of resurrection to explain his death and to save face. No one thought of resurrection in that way. The women going to the tomb may well have hoped that one day Jesus would be resurrected with the rest of them, but that was an event to take place at some

*future* time. And we see this in their bewilderment. We see it in the fact that even faced with an empty tomb, the idea that Jesus had been resurrected didn't even occur to them until the angel told them. Even with the angels' revelation they still weren't sure what to make of it.

Luke goes on in verses 9-12:

**...and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.**

The women go and tell what they've discovered and what the angels have told them to the other disciples. Again, if the first Christians had made these stories up—as they're often accused of doing—this isn't how they would tell it. First, they never would have had the women as the first witnesses to the empty tomb. In their culture the witness of a woman was very nearly worthless. If they'd made this story up it would have been someone like Peter who first discovered the tomb and to whom the angels spoke. But Luke tells us it was the women who were there first and, very predictably, the male disciples write off their story as crazy when they hear it. As far as they were concerned, the women were simply struggling to accept the reality of the situation. They, on the other hand, were realists and knew that dead people stay dead and that resurrection was a future even awaiting all of faithful Israel—not just one person. But it's not hard to imagine how insistent the women would be. Peter's intrigued and he finally decides to go

see for himself. Luke says he ran to the tomb. He stooped down to climb through the low door and he, too, saw the linen cloths in which Jesus had been wrapped laying there empty.

Luke gives us another proof of the resurrection—even though nobody believed it at the time. If the body had been stolen or moved, no one would have unwrapped it and left the linen cloths there. And yet seeing the evidence for himself and hearing the report of the angels that Jesus had risen from the dead, Luke tells us that Peter went home “marvelling”. The Greek word doesn't give the sense so much that he believed, but that he was—just like the women—perplexed by these things. He was amazed, he wondered, but he did not understand. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, but in everything he did and said, he did and said the *opposite* of what people expected of the Messiah. Even here at the end of the story, instead of leading God's people into victory over their enemies, he died—not what the Messiah was supposed to do—and now the angels and the evidence of the empty tomb declare that he is risen—something that wasn't supposed to happen this way. It's certainly not the sort of story we'd expect if it had been made up by the first Christians. If it were made up, we'd expect the women—not to mention Jesus' male disciples—sitting vigil at the tomb, waiting for his resurrection, we'd expect credible witnesses, and we'd expect confidence and faith and hope in the empty tomb, but instead we see just the opposite. Even with the evidence and even with the angels reminding them of Jesus' teaching, the disciples still aren't sure what to make of it all. Even as they regained their faith, it came in stages, first as they met the risen Jesus face to face and then finally in the book of Acts, at Pentecost, as the Spirit descended on them and it all became crystal clear.

The sad thing is that from the confidence that we see in Peter as he

preached on Pentecost and from the confidence we see in the disciples in the book of Acts, we Christians have tended to filter the story of Jesus through our faulty expectations and in doing so we've watered down the Good News in our own way. We've let ourselves be influenced by Greek philosophy and as a result we've watered down the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. If you ask many Christians today what "resurrection" means, if you read popular books or watch popular movies, you'll be told that "resurrection" is nothing more than the soul living on after death with Jesus in heaven. But, Brothers and Sisters, if that's what resurrection means, then Jesus' body would have still been in the tomb.

That's not the only way we filter the story through our faulty expectations. We look around us and see that despite the cross, despite the empty tomb, the world seems to continue on unchanged. Caesar and Herod carry on. The world is still governed by self-seeking and corrupt kings and politicians. War still rages. At times it seems things only get worse. In contrast to the First Century we now have nuclear bombs and terrorists ready to commit suicide to kill innocent people. This is just what stumped the disciples at first. Resurrection was supposed to herald the end of the present age and the beginning of the age to come. They figured it out, but many Christians have regressed. Because it doesn't meet our expectations, we assume that the kingdom isn't here—that it's something in the future. Or worse, we spiritualise the kingdom much as we spiritualise the resurrection: it's something inside us or it's something entirely otherworldly. The result is that we develop a theology of personal piety and escape: the goal of the Christian life is little more than seeking personal holiness as we wait death or the rapture, at which point we'll leave this sinful body and this

sinful world behind to live in heaven with Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, that's the message commonly preached today, but it's a dim candle compared to the blazing sunlight of the real Gospel, it's a damp squib compared to the explosive dynamite of the real Gospel. As St. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits of all those who have died in him. The Jews of Jesus' day weren't all wrong. The resurrection of the dead *is* something to which we look forward in hope. It is something that will happen to faithful Israel—to all men and women who are "in Christ"—and we have hope because Jesus has gone ahead of us. What has happened to him will—in some way that we aren't now capable of understanding—what happened to him *will* happen to us and to all of Creation as it is purged from the stain of our sin and made new. Brothers and Sisters, this is the meaning of Easter. In Jesus resurrection the kingdom has begun. Just because it hasn't been full consummated doesn't mean that it's not real or that it's something to be found in the future or that it's purely spiritual. Bp. Wright puts it very well when he writes, "Jesus' risen person—body, mind, heart, and soul—is *the prototype of the new creation.*"<sup>1</sup> This is what Jesus' ministry was all about. He showed us how he is the new temple, offering healing and forgiveness himself. He showed us how he is the new jubilee, offering in himself freedom from our bondage to sin. And now, here in his resurrection, we seem him—the Incarnate Word—as the source of new creation, just as he was the source, the well-spring of the old creation. And, Friends, this is why the Good News is such Good News. The fact is that the world is not the same as it was before that first Easter. Jesus has broken the tyranny of sin and death, he has inaugurated his kingdom in power and glory and

we have seen that power and glory as his Church has proclaimed that he is Lord and has marched and spread from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the entire world.

Brothers and Sisters, this is the Good News in which we hope and it's the Good News which we proclaim in the midst of the darkness, in the midst of a world of sin and evil, of war and terror and of death. Jesus is Lord, he is risen from the dead, and he is making all things new—he has overcome sin and death and is renewing and restoring his creation. His resurrection gives us not only a reason to hope as we look forward to our own resurrection, his resurrection gives us, his people, our marching orders. We are to proclaim his lordship, we are to proclaim his kingdom. In the midst of sin and evil we are to do justice and mercy, in the midst of hate we are to manifest the love of God, and in the midst of death we are to manifest the life of Jesus and to share our hope with the world. Again, at Easter we sing, "The strife is o'er, the battle done". Let us also live in such a way as to show our hope to the world that "the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun."

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, you have given your Son to pay the penalty of our sin and to restore life to us and to your creation. As we think on the empty tomb and on his resurrection, remind us of the hope we have in Jesus, remind us that in him you are making all things new. Give us the grace to live the new life we have in him and fill us with joy and with courage as we live in that hope and proclaim your kingdom to the world. Remind us that your kingdom is more than other worldly hope and that it is breaking in here and now. Give us the courage of faith to make it known as we pursue righteousness and justice, as we respond to hate with love, and as we give despairing people reason to hope in Jesus. We ask this through him, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Simply Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 189.