

Easter Sunday

April 21, 2019

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**Revelation 21:1-6**

**Luke 24:1-11**

### **On Earth as It Is in Heaven**

*God will be with them, and will wipe every tear from their eyes. – Revelation 21:3b*

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Listen to the story from Luke's gospel:

*On the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for 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 handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 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.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

God, whose other name is Surprise, startle *us* today. Like those sleepy, grieving men and women long ago, give us the surprise of our lives when we encounter the great Good News of everlasting life! Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your truth. Help us recognize your love that is more powerful than death, in Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Baloney! ... Hogwash! ... "Horse Hockey!" As Colonel Potter used to say on M\*A\*S\*H ... Rubbish! That's what the apostles first thought the women were feeding them when the ladies told them what they had seen and heard at Jesus' tomb. The translation here softens the language quite a bit...when the women run to tell Peter and the other apostles, and all the disciples that the tomb is empty! That...



*"Resurrection of Christ and Women at the Tomb," Fra Angelico, 1442*

Christ is risen!  
He is risen indeed!

They thought it was “an idle tale.” And they didn’t believe them!

They thought it was BS. That’s what the Bible actually says here: they thought it was *leiros*. It’s a vulgar term used to describe a holy moment. (That’s what I’m saying; there’s a cuss word in the Easter story.) Why? I’m convinced that Luke did it on purpose. Luke’s speaking ... in common language. He’s making the plain contrast between what the women knew, and what the world accepts.

And why would they believe it anyway? We, who are so used to this story, forget just how incredible the whole thing sounds. Dead people do not get up and walk out of the tomb. Dead is dead. We learn this very early with the loss of our pets, grandparents and great-grandparents.

Rob Peterson tells the story of a woman who looked out into the back yard one day and saw her dog shaking the life out of the neighbor’s rabbit. Her family did not get along with these neighbors, so this was going to be a disaster! She ran out, grabbed the dog and wrestled the now extremely dead rabbit from its mouth. She panicked; she didn’t know what to do. She took the rabbit inside, gave it a bath, blew it dry it to its original fluffiness, combed it until that rabbit was looking good. Then she snuck into the neighbor’s yard and propped the rabbit back up in its cage.

An hour later she heard noise coming from the next door neighbor’s. She ran over. “What’s going on?” Her horrified neighbor cried, “Our rabbit! Our rabbit! He died a week ago. We buried him, and now he’s back!”

Who wouldn’t be shocked by that?

I want to say a word to those of you who were dragged here this morning. You know who you are. Maybe somebody bribed you, offered you brunch. Don’t worry; I’m not going to give you a hard time. I’m glad you’re here; we all are. And I want to be honest with you. This story *is* pretty unbelievable, but not entirely unpredictable. I mean ... think about it. All the gospel history says the same thing about Jesus. Everywhere he went new life followed him – whether he was redeeming a dead party when the wine ran out, or healing a paralyzed man who hadn’t walked in years, or calling four-days-dead Lazarus out of his tomb -- everything Jesus did raised someone or something out of hopelessness to new life.

It only makes sense that death couldn’t hold onto him. There are things that only God can do. I don’t claim to understand the mysteries of the universe, but I can say for sure that his first disciples didn’t have any trouble understanding that he was the Son of God. Look at his life. Think of his impact. Here we are 2000 years later, nearly 3 billion of us worshiping him around the world -- in coffee shop churches and in great cathedrals. Honestly, that’s one reason I believe this story. Not only because of what he did back then, though that clearly matters. I believe it’s true because it’s still happening today!

He’s still raising people and situations up out of hopelessness. He has never stopped.

So many of you have said you love to hear me tell about my friend Scott, the former pastor of the church where I grew up. Every year on Easter Sunday, sometime during the day, Scott's phone will ring. A voice on the other end will say:

"Jesus is on the loose!"

Then a hang up. Scott knows who it is. It's his seminary roommate's quirky way of saying:

"Christ is risen!  
He is risen, indeed!  
Alleluia!"

It wouldn't be Easter for either of them without it.

But how can we be sure? How can Scott and his friend, and the women who came from the tomb, and you and I know that the Easter story isn't a whole bunch of hooey? How? Well... I could say, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That would be true. I could say, *because he lives, you will live also.*<sup>i</sup> That's what he told his first disciples. I could say by quoting Paul that:

*Nothing can separate us from the love of God ... not fears for today, nor worries for tomorrow – even the powers of hell cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.*<sup>ii</sup>

I could remember that others saw him alive. In the very next scene in Luke, the Risen Christ came alongside two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. He also showed up on the beach while some of them were fishing. And he entered a room full of people -- without using the door – not just to show off, but for the purpose of showing the wounds in his hands and feet to Thomas, a disciple who had some trust issues.

But all that was long ago.

For me the more compelling evidence that he's risen, that he's loose in the world, is what I see and hear for myself.

I have felt his presence at the bedside of someone resting into her death. There is a peace that comes from knowing that death is not the end of life...that love lives beyond the grave!

For myself, I see him alive in the people in this congregation who continually choose Jesus' way of welcoming all instead of protecting a few.

I see him alive in this congregation's attempts to be a community that prizes unity instead of uniformity, and to speak the truth in love, gently and persistently.

I see him alive out in the parking lot at early dawn on Sunday mornings. I see him in the faces of the ushers, and communion preparers, and Sunday school teachers as you come to him early in the morning to prepare the sanctuary, and set up your classrooms. I wonder if you know how very much like those first disciples you are, the ones who went to the tomb early in the morning and met the angels there.

I know that Christ is risen because I've seen him in the courage of people who have been hurt by the church somewhere, and decide to give it another chance here, coming to a New Members class, or joining a Bible study, or a small group, or the choir.

I've heard his voice just this week in the faith of little 2-year-old Teddy Goodman's family. Teddy died suddenly last weekend. Teddy's mom grew up in this congregation. His grandparents are here. On Good Friday, his grandfather told me, "We have turned to our Lord for comfort and peace."

I've seen Jesus moving in the generosity of people who are offering up their savings to help rebuild the great cathedral of Notre Dame, and the African American churches of Louisiana, following the fires.

I know he's risen because I've seen him alive, and so have you; even if – like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus – even if you didn't know that it was Jesus. You have seen him in the faith and courage of people who face unbearable situations, people who discover new life.

Christ is risen!  
He is risen indeed!

In my humble opinion, *The Shawshank Redemption* is one of the greatest films ever made. Tim Robbins plays Andy Dufrane, a banker convicted of killing his wife and her lover, in spite of his claims of innocence. In Shawshank State Prison he meets Ellis "Red" Redding, played by Morgan Freeman. The movie is about the brutality of prison life and the strength and fragility of the human spirit.

In one unforgettable scene, Andy is alone in the warden's office working on the warden's personal finances when he finds a LP recording of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Gingerly he takes the record out of its sleeve, places it on the warden's turntable, and music fills the room. Then he turns on the prison's PA system, broadcasting the music throughout the prison yard. Suddenly, and for just a moment, you can see heaven on the prisoner's faces. They are hearing music for the first time in years. And then it's gone.

Andy's temerity costs him a beating and two weeks in solitary. Afterwards he shows up in the cafeteria dirty and disheveled.

"Was it worth it?" Someone asks.

"Easiest time I ever did." Andy says.

"Baloney! ... Hogwash!" (That's not what they really say.) They don't believe him.

He tells them, "I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company."

"They let you have a record player down there?"

Andy points to his head and his heart. "It's in here, and in here. ... They can't take that from you."

"What are you talking about?" Red asks. "Hope," Andy says, as he levels his gaze. Hope.

Easter is about hope, this day, its truth. As incredible as it sounds, the one who was crucified is alive! He's risen from the grave – He's here (head) and here (heart) and he's out there! He's loose in the world! Nothing can stop him and no one can take him from you.

He will continue showing up in the most surprising and seemingly God-forsaken places. I can promise you that.

Easter is our promise of heaven, for sure, but that's not all the resurrection is. In the end, Easter is less about getting us into heaven and more about getting heaven into us.

The passage that Dennis read for us from the Revelation is that vision. Can you see how it's backwards from the way we usually think? John saw a vision of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven, to earth. He heard a voice from the throne of God saying:

*See the home of God is with mortals  
And God will dwell with us  
And we will be God's peoples...  
And wipe away every tear from our eyes...  
Suffering and death will be no more.*

That's what we pray for, some people pray for it every day "*Thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.*" Sometimes we think of God's kingdom as some far off heaven where our spirits go when we die. And they do, and ours will, but that's not what Jesus is asking in his prayer. Jesus taught us to work and pray for God's reign, God's rule, God's realm, God will to come here on earth, as it is in heaven.

The meaning of Easter is about getting heaven into us, long before it's about getting us into heaven.

*"Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven."*

The empty tomb is the supreme example of God's intention for Earth. It's difficult to believe it, I know. There have always been people who have a difficult time wrapping their heads around what happened back then. It just seems too fantastic, other-worldly, and strange. It feels like *leiros*. If you are one of those people, take heart, you're in good company. The first disciples didn't believe it either, not at first.

They had to see for themselves. ... So look around. Listen, watch and you will see that he is alive!

The Lord is risen!  
He is risen indeed!

The best evidence of Easter is in the people who have been sustained and transformed by it. *See, I am making all things new.* He said. How about you?

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<sup>i</sup> John 14:19

<sup>ii</sup> Romans 8:38-39