

The Resurrection of Our Lord – April 17, 2002 (C)
Luke 24:1-12

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The theme of these past three days, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and now Easter (which began last night at the vigil), is life, death, and resurrection. We started on Thursday with Jesus preparing his disciples for life—new life that he was about to make possible for them and for all people through his death and resurrection, a different kind of life, one characterized by humility, forgiveness, and love, and freed from our present captivity to the powers of sin, death, and evil. With that goal in mind as the destination that Jesus is leading us to, we plunged into the pain and darkness of Good Friday, following our Lord to the cross, and pondering its deep significance for us and for the life of the world. On Saturday we sat vigil in the darkness, hearing again the stories of the people of God, from the creation of the world to the exile in Babylon. Then we gathered around the font to celebrate and reaffirm our new life in Holy Baptism, followed by the first communion service of the Easter season.

To help us on this journey, we've been going back and forth for the past three days between the Gospels according to John and Luke. As I said last night, each of them tells the story a little differently, with different emphases. On Thursday the vision of life that Jesus gave his disciples before his crucifixion was from John. The focus was on the community of Jesus' disciples and their life together as witnesses to Jesus. This morning we return to Luke, where the vision is more global. If you think back to Advent, you'll remember that Luke devotes his first chapter to the story of two women, Elizabeth and Mary, who both embody and proclaim a vision of the world turned upside down by the coming of Jesus. In Jesus, Luke tells us, God means to upset the present arrangement of value and power, which works to benefit some at the expense of others. Mary's famous song, the Magnificat, lays that out for us. God casts down might and lifts up the lowly. God feeds the hungry and sends the rich away empty. God scatters the proud in their conceit and has mercy on those who look to God for help. The ultimate point in both Luke and John is this: the life that Jesus has come to make possible is not merely a restoration or reanimation of business as usual. This is about new creation, which we called to mind last night both symbolically and in our readings.

There are three things to notice in Luke's telling of the resurrection this morning that help to further that point.

The first is the state of mind of the women who come to the tomb. This is conveyed by this line in verse five: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" It's my favorite line from Luke's telling of the resurrection. It's the line that I couldn't get out of my head twenty years ago when I visited the church in Jerusalem that the emperor Constantine built on the site of what was thought to have been Jesus' tomb. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" I've told you that story before. I'm a bad pilgrim. It is the question asked by the men in dazzling clothes to the women who had come to anoint Jesus' body. "Why did you come to a *tomb* looking for Jesus?" they ask the women. "Tombs are for dead people. You expected Jesus to be dead, didn't you? Well, guess what – he's not here. He is risen!" In spite of all of their time spent with Jesus, in spite of him telling them repeatedly that he would suffer and die, but then be raised from the dead, they did not really believe the last part. But of course why would they? People don't rise from the dead.

The next thing to notice is the next verse. “Remember how he told you...?” But here I want us to notice the significance of whom these words are spoken to. These mysterious men in fancy clothes expect the women to remember Jesus’ teaching. They are treating them as if they were disciples. Which of course they were. Women disciples? Yes! Remember Mary sitting at Jesus feet, the place of a disciples, that I mentioned a couple of weeks ago in my sermon? The fact that this does not jump out at us as unusual today might be an indication of some progress in our attitudes toward women. But in the context of the Ancient Near East, this is radical. All four Gospels have women at the tomb serving as the first witnesses of the resurrection. But Luke and John, each in their own way, make the most of this, making their roles more significant than the others. This is a brief glimpse of the new and different kind of life that Jesus intended for his disciples when he gave them the example of humility, forgiveness, and love for one another on the night of his betrayal. Unfortunately already in the very early history of the church humility quickly went out the window and women put back in “their place.” In this respect, we have for the longest time failed to appreciate the counter-cultural implications of the gospel for full inclusion of women in the life of the church. And we have done so to the detriment of our gospel proclamation.

The final thing to notice here is that the news of the resurrection is hard to believe. The women go back to the eleven, Jesus’ remaining inner circle of disciples, all men – they go back with news of the resurrection and they are not believed. The men thought it was an “idle tale.” They have to go and check things out for themselves, and only then are they open to the possibility. Shades of things to come, because while many will believe the message of the gospel that they will later proclaim, many others will not. And here again the importance of humility, forgiveness, and love is raised. I wonder if the men apologized to the women for not believing them after they returned from the empty tomb. I hope so. I wish Luke had told us that they did. What a lovely living out of Jesus’ teaching that would have been. And then the women would say, “Yeah, to be fair, we didn’t believe Jesus either. We were going to anoint his dead body.” And then they would laugh, give thanks to God, and carry that humility, forgiveness, and love out into the world in their witness to the new thing that Jesus is doing in the world.

The takeaway for us from all of this is that the sequence of life, death, and resurrection that characterize these Great Three Days of the church year is not a “there and back again” kind of story. Resurrection is not a return to normal, to life as it was before. It is something much more radical than that. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead signifies the defeat of the powers of sin, death, and evil that wield such great influence over the way the world works. We do well to remember that as we emerge from the global pandemic that has so disrupted our lives over the past two years. We do well to remember that when we are tempted by the rose-colored glasses of nostalgia to think that we can somehow return to the “good old days” and make things like they were before, forgetting that the “good old days” weren’t really all that good. Jesus conquering of sin, death, and evil by his death and resurrection heralds a new creation with new values and a new kind of power and authority that we have been called into in Holy Baptism. Let us take that vision and that calling to heart, dear people. Let us, with humility and love follow our Lord into his new creation that is even now breaking out all around us, showing forth from the depth of our being our conviction that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)