

## Following the Footsteps of Jesus; Beyond the Tomb

Shepherd's Grace Church

March 31, 2013—Easter Sunday Morning

24But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5The 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. 6Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8Then they remembered his words, 9and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. (Luke 24: 1-12)

Spoiler Alert! Spoiler Alert! As we gather this morning perhaps that is what we should all cry out! We come from Palm Sunday, or even from Good Friday and we want to experience the suspense of what has happened in the last couple of days. We want to experience the mystery, to be awed by the majesty, to be made aware! Instead the end of the story is revealed in the first three words of the service. Christ is Risen! Now we know the end. Are we disappointed? Are we surprised?

Have you ever read a good book? Have you ever read one with a friend? Perhaps the friend was a few pages or a few chapters ahead of you and in your conversation that person starts to reveal some of the events you have not had a chance to learn about yet. Often times this happens with movies. There is a movie out that you really want to see. Before you have a chance to see it, a friend starts to tell you about it. Quickly you react! Spoiler Alert! Spoiler Alert! You cry out in a loud voice so your friend will know you have not had a chance to uncover that part of the story or worse yet, the ending where all is revealed!

In this way maybe we should shout Spoiler Alert for Easter Sunday! Most Easter services invite us in with music and pageantry that provides immediate information contrary to that which we learned on Good Friday. When we left Friday, we left in darkness. We left in silence! We left with Jesus being taken down from the cross and quickly laid in a tomb, but we left with Him dead! There was no mistake about that! Jesus was dead!

Now we come in the middle of the morning and we walk into flowers and songs and butterflies! Our senses are heightened as we suspect that something has changed! Before we have a chance to catch up with the story, before we can read through the chapters of God's plan as it has unfolded, some

unwitting pastor shouts out the end to the story! CHRIST IS RISEN! Whoa! Wait just a minute here! How did that happen? He was dead! He was laid in the grave and He was dead! Now he is risen? Spoiler Alert! Catch me up! Let me read! Let me digest! Let me uncover the mystery!

To that I say Amen! To that I say, let's do it! Tell me, where are you? Have you followed the footsteps of Jesus to the mountain where we learned to pray? Have you followed Him to the synagogue where He taught us His mission? Have you followed Him to the lakeshore where He taught us to prepare? Have you followed Him to the table where He taught us to serve, to honor, to share with Him and one another? Have you followed Him into Jerusalem where He taught us to respect one another, to be committed to God, and to reject those things that are not of God? Have you followed to that place where He made a new covenant with all of us? Have you followed Him to Gethsemane where he was betrayed? Have you followed him to Calvary where He was crucified?

Regardless of where you are in your faith journey, regardless of where you are in your own understanding of Jesus, you are ready to hear the story of what has happened this morning! Today we remember! Today we celebrate! Today is not the end of the book! It is the beginning! Where it begins is somewhat unbelievable! It begins with women! That in itself is almost unbelievable! Women have no voice in the world of Jesus! They are regarded as non-persons so how can they in any way be of significant impact in this story! This new beginning is a reminder to all that God uses that which seems least to the world to become most in His new creation!

Remember what we thought was the end of the story on Friday. Jesus was dead! He was completely dead but it was the women who followed Him all the way to the tomb. They were there to the end but now we find those same women here at the beginning. Early in the morning in the pre-dawn hours of the day following Passover, the women go to the tomb again. They take what they believe will be necessary to prepare for a fitting end to Jesus' life. They go to honor and love Him in death just as they have honored and loved him in life! That is a women's role!

When they get there, they step immediately out of that role. They find the stone rolled away from the tomb. The stone was placed there to insure that none of Jesus' followers would break in and attempt to steal the body. It is described in one place as 8 feet in diameter, 2 feet thick and weighing several tons! To move it would not have been an easy task and so they are perplexed. After they enter the tomb they meet two men wearing dazzling white clothing and they are terrified! The two men ask them why they are looking for the living among the dead!

This is the second unbelievable part of our story! What do the two mean we look for the living among the dead! Jesus was dead! Jurgen Moltmann a renowned German theologian says that it was necessary for Jesus to be completely dead. Unless He is dead, there could be no miracle of resurrection. Several have examined Jesus and determined that He is completely dead. Soldiers pierced his side, Joseph and Nicodemus have wrapped him and the women themselves have observed him. Jesus is dead! What do these men mean when they ask why are we looking for the living among the dead?

As early as the days of Aristotle there was great fear of being buried alive. People went to great lengths to insure that those who were buried were dead. We can understand that. As recently as the 19<sup>th</sup>

century people used to put a pole outside a grave with a bell tied to it. The string from the bell was attached to the hand of the person who was being buried in case the person woke up and discovered what happened! Appropriate action has been taken to be sure that only the dead are buried! Jesus is dead!

Then we hear the unbelievable! The question! Why are you looking for the living among the dead? The women move from fear to fantasy! Is it possible that Jesus is alive! How could it be? It is unbelievable for us this morning also. Wherever we come from to today's story we still struggle with resurrection. In fact, I believe anyone who takes resurrection seriously should struggle with it. It should be unbelievable based on what we know. It has not happened before! We have never seen it! We should not accept it easily!

Resurrection is an unbelievable event based on what we know! Life ends in death. That is the physical law of the universe right. Because it is a proven scientific law we question when we hear that the law is being violated! We wonder how can it be? We are curious! When we left on Friday we were not expecting this! Everything to that point had been predictable. Jesus had angered the status quo, annoyed the powers that be and was punished for it! His punishment was death. Resurrection throws the predictability of our lives off balance. We could understand death but this...How can we understand or believe this? If the dead don't stay dead then what can we count on? We have come to expect the constants of life and death!

From here then we can acknowledge with those who haven't heard the whole story that resurrection deserves to be questioned. The only possible explanation for resurrection is a suspension of the laws of nature. The only way these laws can be suspended are if there is a force greater than those laws at work. The only force greater than those laws is the one who creates those laws! Resurrection brings us face to face with an inescapable conclusion; If we believe in what is reported we must acknowledge there is something greater than the laws of nature. God must be breaking in to our world and if we were terrified with the women before we are even more terrified now. It is all just a little too much to take in! God has entered our world and has broken the chains of death! How can this be?

Perhaps we have overstated our case when we have proclaimed CHRIST IS RISEN! That case is one based not on inescapable fact but based on faith. We may as Christians claim that faith overcomes all doubt but the truth is that faith comes from doubt. Faith comes from the questions we raise and cannot answer. Faith comes when there is no other possible explanation.

The women who found the empty tomb remembered Jesus' words as they walked back to the others. They remembered his promise of resurrection just as it had been told them by those in the tomb, but when they shared the story with the disciples and the others, most found it an "Idle tale." The Greek word is *leros* which is the root of the word delirious! Those who heard the faith testimony of the women at the tomb thought they were out of their ever lovin' minds! They thought they were crazy and they chose not to believe them!

Those of us who meet the resurrection with certainty this morning should remember that many who first heard the word met the claim with doubt and suspicion. Even those to whom Jesus had given the

secret mystery of eternal life could not accept what others were saying. As the story unfolds this morning, we should remember that it is not fact that persuades others but faith.

The women shared their story with great conviction. Most doubted, but one believed. Peter, the one who doubted and deserted only three days earlier listened to the testimony of the women, got up and ran to the tomb, saw the wrappings and was amazed! All who hear this story this morning should recognize they are no longer on spoiler alert! The whole story has been told. The ending is the only thing remaining. We are nearly ready to turn the last page and we turn it together.

God, the one true God who could not be in the presence of sin loved the world He created so much that He was willing to give His only Son as an atoning sacrifice for the sin the world was guilty of. In His gift is such incredible grace that we are once again reconciled to right relationship with Him.

Jesus' death is necessary not as a consequence of those Roman and Jewish politicians of Jesus day, but as the consequence of all our sin. We owed a debt we could not pay, God paid a debt He did not owe and he did it for us! That occurred once and for all time at the cross on Good Friday. Jesus walked that part of the journey and as Moltmann also said it was such a horrible thing that even God turned away. God however turned back and sometime after midnight Saturday, God created out of death a new life not just for Jesus but for each one of us who will accept His great love for us! That new life ends not in death but in eternal life spent praising the one true God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

That is the testimony the women brought back from the tomb. That is the testimony that most rejected as the words of delirious women. That same testimony however moved one! Peter got up and ran to the tomb. Peter who had doubted and deserted now received God's grace for all his sins. He received because of the testimony of others. While many may call us delirious, some will receive, some will believe and together we can change the world!

The footsteps of Jesus take us beyond the tomb. They take us to new life not in fact but in faith and in faith we receive the beginning of the story today. This story goes forward with us, the church called to move beyond tall tales to accept that which we professed even at the beginning! Christ is risen! And all God's people say, "Christ is risen indeed!" Amen!