

"The Vindicated Word" Luke 24:1-12

April 4, 2010

Resurrection of Our Lord/Easter Sunday

Text: "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" (Luke 24:5–7).

Why seek the living among the dead? It's a good question. What were the women doing there, early in the morning on the first day of the week? What did they expect to find? They were going to finish Jesus' hasty burial. They had come with burial spices and oils. They expected to find a tomb with stone door, and a corpse. They were sensible and rational. They may not have been as "sophisticated" as you and I, but these women knew that corpses stay dead.

What they found was an open, empty tomb and two men with clothes that shined like Jesus at His transfiguration. Heavenly brightness. You can assume angels here. That was unexpected, but their news shouldn't have been: "He is not here, but has risen!" Unusual, yes. Out of the ordinary, certainly. Not your everyday experience. But it shouldn't have been unexpected.

Jesus has told them at least three times in advance, and hinted at it a few times more. "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." The angels might have said, "He told you. He prepared you. He predicted it. Why didn't you believe Him?"

Why don't we? Face it. If someone you knew told you that he was preparing to die and on the third day come back to life, would you believe him? Put yourself in the disciples' sandals. They had left their lives and livelihood to follow Jesus. Peter, Andrew, James, and John left a family business high and dry to go off with this itinerant preacher from Nazareth who said to them little more than "Follow Me." Matthew left a lucrative tax collection business to follow Jesus. Things are going along just fine—miracles, teaching, crowds, popularity—until Jesus starts talking what can only be called "crazy talk." "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." Wouldn't you have some questions? A few doubts? Misgivings maybe?

When the women returned and told the Eleven, no one believed them. It seemed like nonsense. When Peter saw the empty tomb and the burial cloths, he wondered to himself what had happened. He had forgotten Jesus' words; he did not believe Jesus had risen.

This gives Luke's account an even greater ring of authenticity and truth. The disciples did not expect this despite what Jesus told them. The women did not expect this despite what Jesus told them. Remember the test of a prophet: if what he predicts comes to pass, he is reliable and true, but if not, he is false and deserves to die for lying in the name of God. Was Jesus a reliable prophet or a lying deceiver?

A long time ago, St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Dizzy Dean predicted at the start of the season that his 1934 Cardinals would win the pennant and that he and his brother would win at least 40 games. When he was asked about such a bold prediction, he said, "It ain't braggin' if you can do it." As history records it, they did it. Dizzy won 30 games, his brother Paul won 19, and the Cardinals won the World Series in seven games. "It ain't braggin' if you can do it."

Three times Jesus predicted His death and resurrection. It ain't braggin' if you can do it. He did it. He rose from the dead. The word from the tomb is this: "He is not here, but has risen. Remember how He told you." Jesus is vindicated. He is proven to be true. His Word is proven to be reliable. This is the linchpin of our faith, that He "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25).

To the skeptical Greeks of Corinth, who were perfectly comfortable with an immortal soul but skeptical of a resurrection body, Paul wrote that magnificent fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians which begins this way: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me" (15:3–8).

Paul goes on to flesh out what the implications are if Christ is not raised from dead. If Christ is not raised, then Paul's preaching and the preaching you are hearing here today is empty. It is hot air and wasted words. If Christ is not raised, then your faith is empty too. Your believing is for nothing; there is no point. If Christ is not raised, then Paul's witness and all the eyewitnesses—all 500 plus—are liars in the name of God who have perpetrated the biggest hoax ever pulled in the religious world. If Christ is not raised, then your trust in Him is futile and misplaced, and worse, you are still in your

sins. If Christ is not raised, then all the dead who have gone before us are lost and there is no hope of ever seeing them again.

Paul says this: "If the only reason we have hope in Christ is in this life, that somehow Jesus will help us cope, make us feel good about ourselves, help us be healthy and wealthy, if that's all there is to Jesus, then we are the most pitiful fools that have ever bought into a religious lie."

If Christ is not raised from the dead, if there is some box of bones out there with Jesus' name on it, then you would do well to find another religion or perhaps abandon religion altogether. That is how important the resurrection of Jesus is. If Christ is not raised, then He can not be trusted, His Word can not be trusted, His endorsement of the Old Testament and His guarantee of the apostolic word of the New Testament is nothing more than empty talk and wishful thinking. If Christ is not raised, then His promise of life after death for us is worthless.

The message of the angel rings out from the tomb, across the centuries, to your ears here today. "He is risen!" Mary Magdalene and the other women saw and heard and bore witness. Peter and John saw and bore witness; the Eleven and the two on the road to Emmaus; the five hundred; James and all the apostles; Paul. All of them testify, many bearing witness with their lives as martyrs to the fact of Jesus' resurrection.

This word may seem like nonsense to you, to all of us who are skeptical and scientific people, just as it did to the disciples when the women brought the message from the tomb. But suspend your skepticism and hang it to the cross. These people who testified did so with their lives. They could have saved themselves quite easily by simply denying that Jesus had risen. They could have saved their lives by taking the authorities to the dead body of Jesus. The Romans and the religious authorities of Israel could have put down this Jesus movement in a heartbeat by parading a rotting corpse through the street. But they did not, because there was no corpse. Jesus was risen, just as He had said.

In 2007, a group of fifteen British sailors were held captive in Iran for twelve days for allegedly invading Iranian waters. They signed statements indicating that they indeed were in Iranian waters. They also signed statements apologizing for past British transgressions against Iran. After their release, they renounced everything they had signed. Under pressure, they were willing to lie in order to save their lives. It happens all the time. But it did not happen with those eyewitnesses who saw

Jesus alive after His death. They could have spared their lives by changing their story, but they did not. They stuck to their story, as unbelievable as it was.

You and I live in a privileged time. We live in the “last days” of the old creation, the time of the fulfillment. The work of saving this fallen world is accomplished. The new creation has dawned. The dead are raised. “As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). Christ has risen. His Word is vindicated, that is, proven to be true. The apostolic Word which we have contained in the Bible is also vindicated. The ministry of the Word and the Church gathered around His Word is vindicated. Your faith in Christ is vindicated. You can be as confident of your resurrection as Jesus is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. Our preaching is not in vain. Your faith is not in vain. Your sins are forgiven. There is hope in this life, hope in your death, hope for eternal life with God, hope for a new creation. And it all hangs on this little sentence: He is risen.

We have come a long way in our Lenten pilgrimage through Holy Week to this bright and glorious day. We have heard the words of Christ to us: the pardoning Word of His forgiveness, the promising word of paradise, the faithful word spoken in abandonment, the compassionate word to His mother, the suffering word of His thirst, the dying word committing His spirit to the Father, the remembering word of the Lord’s Supper, the fulfilled word of His mission—“it is finished,” the restful word of His tomb.

And here today, the vindicated and vindicating word of the resurrection. Rejoice, dear baptized, believing child of God. Rejoice. He is risen! Remember what He told you.

Let us pray: For Your resurrection, for Your appearances to eyewitnesses, for Your Word, Your Baptism, Your body and blood, Your forgiveness, life, and salvation, for the sure hope of eternal life and our resurrection, we give You thanks and praise, most holy Jesus. Amen.