



“Life Doesn’t End Here”
Scripture – Luke 23:50-24:12
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, April 21, 2019

What was Luke thinking when he wrote about the empty tomb? We have scarce information about Luke, but we know he never met Jesus. He set out to write an orderly account of the events that had rocked first century Palestine. He interviewed numerous people who had known Jesus and witnessed his teachings and healings. Luke may have talked to disciples who were present at the Last Supper and had witnessed the kiss of betrayal late at night among the grove of trees on the Mount of Olives. Luke may have interviewed people who saw the barbaric crucifixion and witnessed the limp body of Jesus hanging on the cross. He may have spoken to Joseph of Arimathea who donated his tomb and the women who accompanied him to the burial site. The women surely told Luke about the moment the lifeless body of their master was poured into the tomb. When they buried their teacher, they buried their hopes.

Luke may have talked to some who had seen the hefty stone that had been rolled aside. But, what was he thinking when he wrote that a handful of women were the first to discover the empty tomb? He knew that their culture rejected the witness of women. If he was intent on building a solid case that people would believe, he would not have placed women in the role of witnesses. Luke would not have written women into the story of the resurrection – unless it was true.

Luke was not alone in making this claim. All four gospels, written by men, declare that women, not men, were the first witnesses to the empty tomb. Luke points out that after discovering that the body of Jesus is missing, the women immediately tell the 11 apostles. The men’s reaction was not to burst into celebration. It was to roll their eyes because they simply did not believe them.

Actually what the NRSV says, is that the women’s words were “an idle tale.” The translators of the NRSV did not translate the Greek word accurately. The Greek word is “leiros” and it does not mean idle tale. They borrowed that from the King James Version. The J B Philips Bible translates leiros as “sheer imagination.” The Greek word does not mean that either. Several different translations say the women’s words were “nonsense.” Wrong again. At least one translation says “they were making it up.” Nope. It doesn’t mean that either.

Standing in the pulpit, I am not going to tell you precisely what the word means. Professor Anna Carter Florence says it is a locker room word. “It’s what organic farmers use to fertilize their fields.”¹

According to Luke, the women’s claim stirred Peter. He dashed out the door and ran straight for the tomb. Was it because he believed the women and wanted to corroborate their testimony, or was he furious with them for what he assumed was their misguided attempt to lift their spirits? Did Peter sprint to the tomb so that he could confirm their words, or so that he could confirm they were unreliable?

We have no indication of Peter's motives, but according to Luke, when Peter reached the tomb, he spotted the linen burial cloths but not the body of Jesus. Stunned, Peter did not return to the disciples. He rambled off by himself to see if he could sort it all out.

Like Peter, like the women, like the other disciples, we are well acquainted with death. However, we are not so sure what to do with resurrection.

You may have seen the video that has been circulating that has a Christian pastor, a Muslim Imam, and a Jewish rabbi seated behind a table addressing a crowd. There is a microphone in front of each of them and a facilitator is posing questions. The facilitator asks: What do you hope people will say about you at your funeral?

The Imam leans forward to the microphone and says, "I hope people will say I put the needs of my congregation before my own." The minister speaks into his microphone and says, "I hope they will say I extended my ministry beyond the walls of my church." All eyes turn to the rabbi who says, "At my funeral, I hope they will say, 'Look, he's moving!'"

Living in a Good Friday world where darkness seems to dominate, we know all about death, but resurrection seems too good to be true, so we make light of it.

When we peer into places of death – the home where the family has been crushed by the loss of their child, a methamphetamine clinic where people struggle to overcome their addiction, prison where both the guilty and the innocent mark the painfully slow march of time, a crime-ridden neighborhood where gangs kill each other over small patches of turf, the smoldering ashes of Notre Dame Cathedral, three African American churches torched by hate-filled individuals – when we peer into places of death, we see loss and despair. To prevent ourselves from being overwhelmed by massive misery, we shield ourselves from focusing too intently and identifying too intimately with multiple incidences of suffering. We direct our gaze elsewhere.

Yet, even when we exile places of suffering from our consciousness, we do not entirely prevent them from burrowing their way into a place deep within us. Then, when heartbreak strikes us personally, the sadness we feel is not only for what has battered us, but is heightened by the many sorrows that have been nesting within us. While this intensifies our grief, it also reminds us that we are not the only one who suffers. Everyone does. No matter the façade others display to the world, each of us experiences pain and loss. Such awareness helps to prevent us from becoming overly pre-occupied with self-pity.

Further, suffering can drive us to realize that we are unable to handle our suffering alone. We need friends to help us shoulder the burden and we need the reminder that God suffers with us.

This is the central meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus. God feels the depths of our pain. When we suffer, God suffers. While awareness that God is with us in our anguish helps, it is still not enough to ignite a vibrant spirit of hope.

Returning to our text, both the men and the women were perplexed by the empty tomb. However, it was not long before all of them became convinced that Jesus had been resurrected. In fact, the apostle's experience of the risen Christ was so life-transforming, that they changed from men who were afraid and who denied their relationship with Jesus, to men who would eventually be put to death for their fierce faith in him.

Since the first Easter, people have been skeptical about the news of Jesus' resurrection. Many have written it off as wishful thinking, an idle tale, leiros.

It is healthy to ask questions and not to dismiss our doubts too quickly. However, it is essential that we also open to possibilities that go beyond what can be proven by the five senses. No first century spin doctor could have transformed the women and the disciple from terrified doubters into dedicated evangelists erupting with good news to share with others. No memorial society dedicated to their crucified Master, could have converted their deep sorrow into overwhelming joy.² No wishful thinking could have resurrected such courage and hope from the despair of Friday when their world collapsed in bleak darkness. No mere rumor could have spread around the planet and lasted throughout the centuries creating the world's largest religion.

Something incredible happened. Are you open to the possibility of resurrection?

“In 1994, in the opening round of soccer’s World Cup, the United States faced Colombia, who was heavily favored to win the championship. But Colombia suffered a shocking first-game loss to Romania. This meant that they had to defeat the United States in the next game. In the first half, the match was scoreless when Colombia suffered another devastating blow. Their team captain and star, Andres Escobar, trying to deflect a ball out of bounds accidentally kicked the ball into his own goal. It gave the U.S. a 1-0 lead, and Colombia never recovered. They lost the match and were out of the World Cup.”

“After the game, Escobar was devastated. What was difficult, however, soon became tragic. Drug traffickers had bet huge sums of money on Colombia to win the World Cup, and Escobar’s blunder cost them dearly. So, a few days after returning to Colombia, Escobar was gunned down by members of a drug cartel. His death shocked the country. Thousands lined the street for his funeral.”

“How does one go on, in the face of such a senseless killing? Shortly after Colombia lost, but before he was shot, Escobar had written a letter to his country, published in a national newspaper. Attempting to put the game in perspective, Escobar had written, “Let us please maintain respect. My warmest regards to everyone. It’s been a most amazing and rare experience. We will see each other again soon, because life doesn’t end here.”

“After his murder, Escobar’s fiancé was consumed with anger. She wanted justice, she wanted revenge, but she said that Andres’ words – ‘life doesn’t end here’ – attached themselves to her heart. She said, ‘Eventually, ‘life leads to Andres’ words. No matter how difficult, we must stand back up. Life doesn’t end here.’”³

When your hope is pierced with nails
and the vindictive boot snuffs out tomorrow like an uninvited insect;
when the silence of God-forsakenness vacuums up the music in your soul
and sorrow cloaks the sun in ash,
death stands atop the mountain and stakes its flag.

Yet do not hover behind bolted doors and surrender to Hades.
Gather up your ointments and make your trek to the tomb,
for deep in the grave of defeat the Holy One is plotting a comeback.
Easter always begins when the morning dawn is doubtful
and death is flaunting its victory dance.
But light pierces darkness and new life rises from ruins,
Never give up your grip on hope.
Resurrection is on its way!

NOTES

1. Shannon Kershner, “Easter Rising,” March 27, 2016.
2. Carol Noren, “No Idle Tale,” on the *Thirty Good Minutes* website.
3. Mark Ramsey, “Preaching Easter in the Age of Twitter,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2019, p.37.

Easter Prayer ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Living Lord – On this Easter morning, we join our voices with all creation to sing: “Alleluia!” For you have turned our mourning into dancing; you wipe away our tears and clothe us in joy. We rejoice that the grave could not hold your son, for you have defeated death and opened the way to eternal life. So, with glad hearts and joyful voices, we praise you O God of Life.

No matter how many times we hear the familiar story – of stone rolled away, of grave clothes cast aside – we cannot quite fathom the angel’s words: “He is not here, but has risen.” It is hard to believe such joyous news wherever flames consume or violence rages, leaving sacred sites or beloved lands in piles of ash and rubble. It is hard to believe such joyous news whenever we have reason to grieve, whether we mourn the death of a loved one, the death of a relationship, the death of an identity, or the death of a dream. The headlines, the sound bites, the phone calls in the middle of the night all tell us we live in a ‘Good Friday’ world – a world where darkness gathers as hope hangs on a cross. The brokenness weighs heavy on our hearts, O God.

Today we pray for people of faith throughout the world who have witnessed the devastation of their spiritual homes, and – especially – for the faithful of Louisiana and of Paris who celebrate this, the holiest of days, while their sanctuaries lie in ruin. We grieve with sisters and brothers in Sri Lanka in the wake of horrific attacks that have stolen the lives of so many of your beloved children.

We lift before you those oppressed by injustice, or entombed by despair; those suffering from illness, or held captive to fear. We remember those near and far who are shrouded in darkness, who wonder if death really has won the victory. And yet we pray with confidence that suffering and death do *not* have the final word. Today we stand at the empty tomb and shout: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?”

God of Life – We know that Easter is not the end of the story. Christ goes before us still, leading us into a world that is desperate for good news. You beckon us to follow, calling us to run and tell this amazing news to those we meet. So breathe your Spirit upon us again this day that we might live as a resurrection people. As disciples of the crucified and risen Lord, give us compassion in the face of suffering, courage in the face of injustice, and hope in the face of despair. Send us out, filled with joy and eager to share the good news.

We lift this prayer in the name of our Risen Lord, the one who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.