



"Resurrection People"
Scripture – Luke 24:1-12
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, April 17, 2022

A colleague tells about his friend returning home from a concert in downtown Chicago. He was a student at Northwestern and had taken the train into the city to hear his teacher play with the Chicago Symphony. It was a stirring concert and, when it ended, he was invited backstage to meet a few of the musicians. He was thrilled when they invited him to come along with them to celebrate the night's success.

Later that evening he was back on the train heading home still high on the music and the after party. It was late and the car he was in was completely empty. He was lost in his thoughts and the excitement of the evening. He imagined himself one day playing in the orchestra. He grinned as he pondered a bright future stretched out before him.

But, then the train stopped and someone stepped onto the car through one of the doors behind him. That someone walked the length of the car and sat down directly behind him. And all thoughts of what might one day be flew out the window. His stomach plunged, and he thought to himself, "Well, that was nice, but this is this. And I'll never even make it back to Evanston."¹

Joy can switch to fear in a flash. Just ask the first followers of Jesus.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, women and men – even children – waved palm branches and shouted words of support. Joy was in the air and their souls were bursting with hope. But within four days, Jesus was betrayed and handed over to the Romans. For his followers, joy flipped to fear and hope evaporated.

Jesus was unjustly sentenced to death, tortured, and then killed in one of the most brutal methods human beings have devised. He was nailed to a cross just outside the gates of Jerusalem, and after hanging for a few hours, he breathed his last. His body was pulled down and placed in a nearby tomb.

Then, at dawn on Sunday morning, several women solemnly made their way to the tomb. Luke names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. They carried spices to anoint his lifeless body and they carried something else: grief so piercing they could not think and anger at the injustice that stole from them the one they loved. Today there are thousands in Ukraine who know this anger-ridden grief.

Like the women who dragged themselves to the tomb of Jesus and the people of Ukraine who have lost dear ones, many of us know the feeling of having our hope crucified. We know the searing pain of losing a parent or a spouse, or a friend. We know the feeling of helplessness when a child becomes addicted. We know the look of desperation in one who is mentally ill and mutters, "Please, don't laugh at me."

When the women went to the tomb of Jesus, they carried their grief, they carried their pain, they carried their anger, and they carried their despair. Luke says that when they reached the tomb, the stone was rolled away from the entrance, and when they stepped inside, the body of their Lord was missing. The women did not shout, "He is risen!" Nor did they break into a victory dance. They were baffled and could not make sense of what had happened. Had someone come in darkness and stolen his body?

When we gather at Easter and the organ and brass and timpani strike chords deep within us, and we sing out "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" joy and hope permeate our magnificent sanctuary. But according to the Gospel of Luke, on that first Easter morning, joy and hope were nowhere to be found.

But then, something unexpected pierced the darkness. Something happened that was difficult to believe. Luke writes, "Suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightening 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 is risen.'"

The two messengers from God delivered head-spinning news that left the women terrified, yet amazed. The women dashed off to tell the disciples what had happened, and Luke says: "But the men did not believe the women because their words seemed like nonsense."

Well, that wasn't very smart, was it? Never dismiss the words of women! Especially, not these women. They were the courageous ones who stood by at the crucifixion. They were the faithful ones who went to the tomb to perform one more sacred act.

Luke adds that Peter dashed off to the tomb. We don't know if his intention was to prove the women wrong, or if he was just perplexed and wanted to see for himself. When he reached the tomb, he too, found it empty just like the women had said. And what was his reaction? Luke writes, "He went away, wondering to himself: What happened?"

Of course it was not long before the disciples became convinced that Jesus had risen. In fact, they believed it more than anything else they had ever believed. Their experience of the risen Christ was so life-transforming, that they changed from men who were terrified and who denied their relationship with Jesus, to intrepid believers who would be put to death for their fierce faith.

Since the very beginning, people have been skeptical about the news of Jesus's resurrection. It is healthy to ask questions and not to dismiss our doubts too quickly. However, we must also be 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 disciples from fearful doubters to dedicated evangelists exploding with good news. 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. No mere rumor could have spread around the planet and lasted throughout the centuries.

Pastor Marvin McMickle talks about the dynamic belief in the resurrection in the African-American church. For people whose ancestors were kept in slavery their entire lives, for people whose relatives were lynched, for people who must send their children to school and pray that they will not be caught in the crossfire of rival drug gangs, for people who fear what might happen if they are stopped by the police, for people who remember the Tuskegee experiment, for people who lament the Tulsa massacre, belief in life after death sustains them in life **before** death.

McMickle says he observed this confidence in the resurrection at his home church when they gathered each New Year's Eve for a watch night service. Fifteen minutes before the stroke of midnight, the pastor would begin reading names. These were the names of members of the congregation who had died during the year. But the reaction to the reading of the names is what baffled him when he was young. After the reading of each name, a voice from the pews would say, "Thank you, Jesus" or "Bless the Lord" or "It's all right now." McMickle says, "Honestly, I thought there had been some bad blood, and people were glad that someone was finally dead."

He says "I could not have been more mistaken. Something far more significant was going on that I had not yet fully grasped. People were expressing their conviction in the face of death, that their loved ones were now in God's eternal kingdom. And once the names had been read and the declarations had been spoken, there was a song that united the congregation in the faith that took them back centuries to the faith forged by their ancestors in slavery." They stood together, they swayed, they grasped one another's hands, and they sang.

"I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,
but a band of angels coming after me.
I looked all around me, it looks so fine,
I asked the Lord if it all was mine.
If you get there before I do,
tell all my friends I'm coming too.
Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home."³

Belief that the suffering and the injustices of this world will be made right in the next life, has for centuries prevented people from falling into deep caves of despair and infused them with the needed muscle to carry on amid the trials of life.

We well-educated Presbyterians often base our hope on what we think makes sense. We observe what's happening in the world and make a judgment call on whether or not we think things are heading in the right direction. As a colleague says, "We look for hope in statistics and polls and expert reviews."⁴

We base our hopes on what we can see and touch and hear. But faith in the resurrection spurs us to make room for what we cannot see – what is not yet, but what might be possible with God. Resurrection is not simply about life after death. It is also about the transformations – the radical upgrades – that God can work in us before our time expires.

Are you familiar with horse blinders? They do not actually prevent the horse from seeing. They narrow the horse's field of vision and prevent it from seeing anything except what is directly in front of it.

Maybe you knew this, I didn't until a few days ago, but Panasonic makes horse blinders for people. Seriously. They created them for people who work in open offices and may be distracted by what's going on around them.

Frankly, I'm not so sure it was necessary to create horse blinders for people because most of us already act as if we're wearing them. We unconsciously restrict our field of vision. We leave little room for surprise. We leave little room for something unexpected to happen. We leave little room for God to open a door we've never noticed. We leave very little room for the impossible which is often simply the "not yet."

Faith in the resurrection instills hope in us. Hope keeps us moving forward when life is at its worst, when the forecast looks dismal, when a better day seems impossible. Hope motivates us to keep living even after the doctor has said "I'm sorry, there's nothing more I can do." Hope compels us to spring out of bed and keep looking for a job after months of dead ends. Hope drives us to keep fighting for a just cause in the face of overwhelming odds. Hope inspires us to keep living, loving and laughing even after losing a precious loved one. Hope quells our anxiety and fosters an inner peace even when we must walk through the dark, dark valley of death.

When we sing, "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today" and when we belt out that Easter is "The Day of Resurrection" we proclaim that this world is not all there is. We have another home, an eternal home, far greater than anything we have known in this world. However, we do not simply set our sights on how things will be for us once we cross over to the other side. While we still walk this earth, we partner with God in transforming the world into what God dreams it can become.

As a friend and colleague says, Easter is the day for us "to put a finger in the world's chest and shout No! No! No! There is a more excellent way!"⁵

May we live into our calling to be resurrection people, blinders off, open to God's surprises, and leaning forward into a promising new day.

NOTES

1. Rick Dietrich, "Foolish Wisdom," *Day1.org*, September 21, 2003.
2. Carol Noren, "No Idle Tale," on the *Thirty Good Minutes* website.
3. Marvin McMickle, "But Early Sunday Morning," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2022, p.20-21.
4. Kristy Farber, "Hope on the Road," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2022, p. 12.
5. David A. Davis, "Easter Preaching in a Secular World," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2022, p.5.