

Let Us Walk Through the Door

Luke 24:1-12; Acts 10:34-43

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Christ is risen!

This is the best Sunday of the year to be a preacher! This is a day for proclaiming a new reality that has broken into our world and into our lives.

Christ is risen indeed, and this makes all the difference in the world.

On Good Friday, I preached at Christ Trinity Lutheran Church. I urged us to not move too quickly to what the cross *does* and to simply dwell in the human story of Jesus' death.

I want to begin by encouraging us to do the same this morning at the empty tomb.

Before we get to how the reality of resurrection made its way into the world and what it means for us, I want us to spend a few moments simply dwelling at the empty tomb with the women, with Peter.

Each year when I read the gospel accounts of the resurrection, I am struck by how stunned the first witnesses were.

The women go to the tomb *expecting* to find a dead body—and this despite the fact that Jesus had explicitly predicted that he would rise from the dead three days after his death (Luke 18:31-34).

And yet even the discovery of an empty tomb is not an immediate source of joy or wonder, but confusion and fear.

After the initial shock, the women rush back to tell the disciples and, with the exception of Peter, the disciples don't even seem intrigued— "It seemed to them an idle tale."

If we look at the other gospel accounts, the first reaction of Jesus' followers to the empty tomb is not "Could it be? Did he rise from the dead?" but "Someone must have moved the body" (e.g., John 20:2).

The composite picture in all the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection is that before the empty tomb ever came to be seen as a sign of victory or the vindication of Jesus' life and kingdom proclamation or any of that, it was experienced as a source of fear and confusion and uncertainty **by those who had been closest to Jesus**. This is remarkable.

One often hears the claim that the resurrection could not really have happened—that it was a kind of cover up by the first disciples to save face, or that Jesus "rose in the disciples' hearts" and that the resurrection stories are just a way of conveying the power of this metaphor.

The gospel accounts simply do not read like a conspiracy to cover up Jesus' death. They *certainly* don't read like a clever way to talk about resurrection as a spiritual metaphor for new possibility.

The disciples quite clearly were not expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. There is not a hint of expectation or even ambiguity, not even a trace of, "You know, he said some strange things about dying and about three days later...."

Rather, they are a fearful, confused, devastated bunch who, for by all outward appearances, look like little more than a shattered remnant of a failed leader.

There are many good reasons to believe that the resurrection of Jesus really did happen based on all kinds of different evidence, but for me, one of the most compelling reasons of all is the sheer humanity of this story!

Each Easter, we, like those first witnesses, must remind ourselves and joyfully proclaim the shock, the bewilderment, the sheer unexpected joy of that first Easter: ***This really happened.***

The title of my sermon this morning is taken from a poem by John Updike called "Seven Stanzas at Easter" which I think conveys this beautifully. I want to read a few stanzas:

*Make no mistake: if he rose at all
It was as His body;
If the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit,
The amino acids rekindle,
The Church will fall.*

*It was not as the flowers,
Each soft spring recurrent;
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the Eleven apostles;
It was as His flesh; ours.*

*The same hinged thumbs and toes
The same valved heart
That—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then regathered
Out of enduring Might
New strength to enclose.*

*Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping transcendence,
Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded
Credulity of earlier ages:
Let us walk through the door...*

Let us not mock God with metaphor! Let us walk through the door, this Easter Sunday.

And as our resurrection guide, let's walk with Peter.

Peter is perhaps the easiest of the disciples for us to identify with. Peter makes the mistakes that we would make. Peter also occasionally rises to heights of faithfulness that we aspire to. Peter is all of us.

- It is Peter who walks courageously toward Jesus on water... and then faithlessly sinks (Mat. 14:28-30)
- It is Peter who is the first to confess Jesus as the Messiah... and immediately after, refuses to accept that Jesus must suffer and is promptly rebuked by Jesus—Get behind me Satan (Mat. 16:22-23)
- It is Peter who is the eager beaver pupil on the Mount of Transfiguration—wants to build shelters to commemorate the holy moment with Elijah, Moses, and Jesus, before he is interrupted by the divine voice with different priorities and falls down terrified (Mat. 17:3-6).
- It is Peter who thinks he is impressing Jesus in a discussion about forgiveness by saying, “Up to seven time??” and us then stunned by Jesus’ stuns response: “Not seven times, but seventy times seven...” In other words, “When it comes to forgiveness, if you’re keeping

score, you're doing it wrong!" (Mat. 18:21-22).

- It is Peter who speaks the famous words that Christians down through the ages have claimed as their own: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:67-69)
- It is Peter who refuses to let Jesus wash his feet on the evening of the Last Supper... then, when Jesus says, "unless I wash your feet you have no part in me, breathlessly says, "Then not just m feet, my whole body!" (John 13:8-9)
- It is Peter who falls asleep while praying in Gethsemane (Mat. 26:40). *Could you not stay awake one hour?*
- It is Peter who cuts off a Roman soldier's ear in a spasm of righteous violence (John 18:10)
- It is Peter who, in one of the most gut-wrenching scenes of the Passion narrative, denies Jesus explicitly, and then weeps at the realization of what he has done (John 18:25-27)

Our text from Luke this morning ends with Peter as the only disciple willing to consider that the testimony of the women is anything other than an idle tale.

(This is another fascinating feature of the resurrection accounts! The first witnesses to Easter were women. And the men mostly didn't believe them!)

Peter stands amazed at Jesus' empty tomb. He doesn't know yet what it means. But he will.

Peter knows that what he is faced with is no metaphor. Perhaps he has an inkling that something huge has changed, that these strips of linen represent the turning point of all history. But he didn't know all this right away.

Resurrection was a reality that he had to walk into.

In our bibles, the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are separated by the gospel of John. But Luke is the author of both Luke and Acts, and it was originally written as one volume ("In my former book, Theophilus..." Acts 1:1).

And it's interesting to bypass John follow Peter from the end of Luke to the beginning of Acts.

The last we hear of Peter in Luke is in our text this morning. He sprints to the empty tomb, sees the strips of linen. And He walks away wondering what has happened.

By the time Acts 2 rolls around, Peter isn't wondering any more. He is confidently proclaiming the good news of resurrection at Pentecost.

He preaches to the Sanhedrin, to onlookers, to anyone who will listen. He heals in Jesus' name.

The resurrection of Jesus has transformed Peter the denier, the sleeper, the blurter-out-of-

answers into the rock upon which Christ is building his church.

The resurrection has changed everything.

But even now, Peter still has much to learn. Resurrection is an ongoing living reality that keeps drawing Peter forward into unexpected new possibilities and new life.

To make sense of our second reading from Acts, another of Peter's sermons, we need to know the back story.

Peter has seen this strange vision on a rooftop in Joppa—all kinds of animals being lowered on a sheet—all kinds of lunch options that were forbidden for human consumption by the Torah, the Law of Moses.

He hears a voice saying, "Peter, kill, eat!" and responds as any good Jew would have: "Surely not! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

And then he hears these astonishing words: "Do not call anything impure that God has called clean!"

He is summoned to the house of a certain Cornelius who has also had a vision.

Peter was a Jew, Cornelius a Gentile. And not just any Gentile, but a Roman soldier, a category of people that pious Jews would have kept themselves separate from.

But Peter goes. The risen Christ compels him. And eventually he speaks similar words to his Gentile hosts to those he heard in his vision: "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean."

This is followed by another sermon with resurrection as its anchor:

I now realize it's true that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right..."

This is one of the implications of the resurrection of Jesus that Peter had to learn. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Not just to the people of Israel, but even to Gentiles, to all who fear him and do what is right, to all who are open to the repentance that leads to life.

I can imagine Peter sitting in Cornelius's home with a bemused look on his face. *I guess nothing is impossible anymore. Even Gentiles—who would have thought?! The resurrection of Jesus has changed the rules of the game.*

Peter had to keep on walking through the doors opened by resurrection.

And so do we.

How will we walk through the door opened by resurrection?

Perhaps another way of asking the question is, "How would you live if you really believed that sin and death and evil had been defeated forever by the Lord of life?"

I think there are at least two general convictions that ought to guide the life of everyone who has encountered the risen Christ.

Nothing good that we do is wasted.

Nothing we do to inject beauty, hope, kindness, care, truth, peace, and justice into the world is wasted. No clinging to faith in the face of mockery, no prayer offered in desperate need, no song sung, no garden lovingly tended, no poem crafted, no meal prepared, no burden shared, no hope proclaimed, no tiny act of reconciliation negotiated, no forgiveness offered, no mercy generously extended is wasted, no matter how it might seem.

Each one of these things may seem like feeble offerings in a world of cruelty, violence, triviality, idolatry, and greed. They do not look like victory proclamations. But they are.

Because these are the kinds of things that Jesus did...

... and because Christ is risen from the dead.

No suffering that we endure is final.

No losses, no disease, none of our tears for the violence and destruction in our world (this morning's news out of Sri Lanka!), no grief over relationships that seem broken beyond repair despite our best efforts, no doubts that threaten to crush us, no fear for a future that we cannot understand, no death that threatens to break us with grief is final.

Each one of these things hurts. Sometimes they hurt terribly. But they are not the end.

Because these are the dark places that Jesus entered into and suffered on our behalf...

...and because Christ is risen from the dead.

The Christian life is nothing more and nothing less than a joyful response to an empty tomb.

We, too, are witnesses.

We, too, are to be those who joyfully scratch our heads like Peter and say, *Well, I guess nothing is impossible anymore. The rules of the game have changed because of Easter.*

The tomb is empty. Death has been defeated and refused the final word. The door to life eternal, in this world and the next, has been thrown wide open.

Let us walk through the door. With Peter, with our sisters and brothers around the world, with Christians down through the ages.

Let us see what resurrection has yet to show us.

Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed.*

Amen.

