

Easter Sunday: Luke 24:1-12  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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April 20, 2025

### **The Strangest Story of All**

A colleague of mine David Taylor tells the story of a country minister who went into the city to have some dental work done. He was still a little woozy from the anesthesia when he set off to drive home. On the way he stopped by a liquor store and picked up a month's supply of communion wine. He was driving back to the church when suddenly a deer jumped in front of his car. He slammed on the brakes, momentarily lost control of his car, and drove up on the sidewalk. In the process, the wine bottles crashed into each other and shattered, and the wine spilled over both the front seat and the minister himself.

When the police arrived, they found a man who slurred his words, couldn't walk a straight line, had run his car up on the curb, and reeked of alcohol. "What's your story?" the cop asked. And it dawned on the clergyman how preposterous it all will sound. "Well, officer, the wooziness and slurred speech are from the dentist's appointment in a town far from here. The car's up on the curb because of a deer you will never find. And the smell is of communion wine that has gone everywhere but down my throat, and I expect you to believe it!"

"And yet," David observed, "We stand up in the pulpit on Sunday mornings and tell our congregations, Jesus is the Son of God, but he died. But then he came back to life days later. He promised salvation, but there is still sin. Oh, and by the way, he says, he's coming back one day! And we expect people to believe it."

Many of us who've been Christian for years don't understand, why others who are not Christian are skeptical and resist coming to faith in Jesus. Being immersed in the Christian world, we forget how utterly preposterous our beliefs are to normal people. Two thousand years ago, a man died and came back to life. It frankly goes against all reason, all experience. Dead people don't just get *undead*. Sure, there are people who had been "pronounced" dead, but it was only for a moment and they recovered, thanks to the help of defibrillators or other medical interventions. But that's not Jesus' story. He was dead. Dead as a doornail.

Three days before, he had been whipped severely across his back, which would have led to critical blood loss. Then he had to carry the heavy beam of his own cross through the streets...exhausting. Then he was nailed to the cross, nailed right through the nerves. The shock alone would have been enough to kill a person. Then he hung in the hot Middle Eastern sun for three hours at the height of the day, severely dehydrated, as the contorted position he was pinned in caused his lungs to fill with fluid and drown him. After he breathed his last, a soldier stuck a spear in his side, and blood and water flowed out, indicating the separation of serum and blood cells, a clear sign of death. I'm sorry for being so graphic. But we today don't appreciate how excruciating, how utterly devastating crucifixion is physically. There's no way a person could survive it. And then after all this, Jesus lay in a tomb, sealed off from the world, for two days.

There is no doubt that Jesus had died, that he was dead. And yet, on the third day, the Gospels say plainly, he was alive again.

It's a strange story, the strangest one of all. Never before, and not since has anyone heard of anything like it. Nothing we know prepares us for the claim. We don't really have any reference for it, any category to put it in. It stands outside our experience. It doesn't fit what we know, scientifically or any other way. Such things just don't happen.

Little wonder then that some people, including some Christians, try to put the resurrection into a category we do understand. They say things like the story of the resurrection means that the teachings of Jesus are immortal, like the plays of Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven. Or they say that the resurrection means that the spirit of Jesus is undying, that he himself lives on among us, the way that Socrates does, for instance, in the good that he left behind and the lives of all who followed his great example. Or they say that the language in which the Gospels describe Jesus' resurrection is the language of poetry, and so his rising again is poetic, metaphorical, not literal.

The only problem is, there is no poetry about it. The Gospel writers are not known for being given to fanciful embellishments or artistic expressions of speech. They simply proclaimed it as a fact, "Christ has risen." In fact, the very existence of the New Testament itself proclaims it. Unless something very real took place on that strange, confused morning, there would be no New Testament, no church, no Christianity.

But if I thought that, when you strip it down, when you remove all the contingent aspects, the resurrection is really just an affirmation of the human spirit, as some say, or an endorsement of moral values, or a declaration of Jesus as a Great Moral Exemplar, and no more, I'd say we might as well wash our hands of it. No, really. The human spirit really isn't all that impressive, I don't think. And I don't know anyone who gets very excited one way or the other about "moral values" as such. And, I don't know about you, but whenever I have the feeling that someone is trying to set me a good example, I start edging towards the door. If that's all that this religion is about, well, then we really can't blame anyone for not being interested.

So what then *can* we say? What do I believe actually happened that morning on the third day after Jesus died? I can tell you this: that what I believe happened and what in faith and with great joy I proclaim is that Jesus somehow got up, with life in him again, and glory upon him.

"How" it happened, I cannot tell you. But honestly, I don't find that to be the most important question at the end of the day. Far more important, *and* more interesting, is what this event means.

You see, within a very short period of time after Easter, the followers of Jesus, accepting the fact of the resurrection, began wondering about its meaning. And their conclusion was even more astonishing than the resurrection itself. They reasoned that, more than simply being evidence of the ancient belief in "the immortality of the soul," say, God's raising Jesus from the dead was in fact something perfectly new in the history of the universe. Christ didn't just survive death, He defeated it. And this is a sign of God's greater purpose and power to restore his creation to its full

stature and goodness. For, just as death can be seen as the ultimate enemy, the cause and culmination of all that is wrong with the world, so the resurrection can be seen as a pledge of God's ultimate victory over all that opposes him.

As St. John Chrysostom wrote in a fourth century sermon (which is still read in every Orthodox church on Easter), "O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons fall. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave. Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and bestowing life upon those in the tombs."

And because Christ took on death, the "final boss" among the powers and forces aligned against us, we are given hope that the remainder of the powers are similarly being defeated and their power broken. The oppression and violence, hopelessness and addiction that humanity has labored under are being dealt with as well.

Now, here we run into another problem, an even deeper problem than the unbelievability of the resurrection. The problem is this: if this is what the resurrection means, that the powers of death and destruction have been broken, what do we make of all the evidence that speaks against it? All the evil, hurt, despair, disease, and death in the world—how do we make sense of the fact that all these bad things still continue to plague us? Human history and Christian experience attest to the constant struggle against sin and evil in our lives even now, even as Christians. It would seem then that all the talk of the "victory of faith"—Jesus conquering death—is nothing more than empty words, a mask covering a contradiction between faith and experience, between what we believe and what we see. So what can we make of this?

A helpful way of understanding our situation was offered by a pair of distinguished writers—CS Lewis of England and Anders Nygren of Sweden. They saw a parallel between the New Testament and the situation during the Second World War. God's victory won over death and sin through Christ, they argued, was like the liberation of an occupied country from Nazi rule. Few of us can imagine what it's like to live in a place controlled by an occupying power, living under the shadow of a foreign presence. Part of what makes such a situation so difficult is its utter hopelessness. Nothing can be done about it. No one can defeat it.

But imagine one day you hear some electrifying news. There has been a far-off battle, and somehow, it has turned the tide of the war. A new phase has begun, and the occupying power is in disarray. Its forces routed. In the course of time, the Nazis will be driven out of every corner of Europe. But they are still present in the occupied country. And so in one sense, the situation has not changed, but in another, more important sense, the situation has changed totally. The scent of victory and liberation is in the air. There's a total change in the climate.

I remember reading about a man who had been a held prisoner in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Singapore. He described the astonishing change in the atmosphere of the camp that came about when one of the prisoners (who owned a short-wave radio) learned of the collapse of the Japanese war effort in the middle of 1945. Although everyone in the camp still remained prisoners, they knew that their enemy had been beaten. It would only be a matter of time before

they were released. He said that, when they heard the news, he and the other prisoners began to laugh and cry, as if they were free already.

The end of the Second World War in Europe came about *a year* after the establishment of the bridgeheads in Normandy in June 1944. But a real, objective change had occurred sometime before in the theater of war—with the resulting subjective change in the hearts and minds of captive people. And so it is with us now. In one sense, victory has not come. In another, it has. The resurrection declared *in advance* God's total victory over all evil and oppressive forces in the world. Their backbone has been broken. And we can begin to live now in the light of that victory, knowing that the long night of their oppression will end, is coming to an end.

That Jesus was raised from the dead may be difficult for us or anyone to believe. But the even bigger claim is that, in that event, God changed the world, the whole of creation. His resurrection instituted a new situation, a new order. It inaugurated God's campaign to retake this world and liberate it from evil.

We live in the in-between time, of course, between the announcement of God's campaign and its completion, stuck in the middle where we are still tested, where we still struggle, where we still fall and have to get back up again. But we can do so because we have hope. We know the war has been won, the victory already decided, the power of the Enemy broken, and it's only a matter of time till all of creation, all of God's territory is reclaimed. It is for this reason, as unbelievable as it is, as unaccepted as it is, as farfetched as it is and far-reaching as its implications are, we proudly, powerfully, and profoundly proclaim, "Christ is risen." The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!