***A DAY TO REMEMBER***

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Text: Luke 24:1-49

“But…” That is the first word in Luke’s account of this Easter day. It seems an odd place to begin the resurrection story. But what? “But this,” he seems to say: you cannot understand the events of this day, including the resurrection, without recalling what happened in the days preceding it. You cannot grasp resurrection without remembering Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial. They are inextricably bound: his death and resurrection,

the cross and empty tomb,

Good Friday and Easter.

With a single word, Luke evokes memories of days just past with the story that is about to unfold at the tomb where Jesus’ broken body was laid to rest. So, we begin with “but.”

Thursday evening, we gathered here in the twilight to hear Luke’s account of those hours from the Last Supper through the burial of Jesus’ crucified body. It is a story that is familiar to most of us:

the Last Supper with Judas sitting at the table with the rest

as Jesus says, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Jesus praying in the garden and urging his disciples to stay awake,

Judas’ betrayal leading to Jesus’ arrest and trial,

and just when it seems Pilate might let Jesus go with a beating,

the cries of “Crucify him!” persuade Pilate to condemn him to that awful fate.

Then, Jesus’ crucifixion with criminals crucified on either side of him,

his last words: *Father, forgive them…*

*Today you will be with me in Paradise…*

*Into your hands I commend my spirit.*

His death

and the words spoken by the centurion: “*Certainly this man was innocent*.”

His burial in “*a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid*”

the women looking on – at the cross, at the tomb,

and then the silence of the sabbath while the world and the women wait.

It seems the end of the story, the dashing of all hopes for the disciples and all those who believed Jesus might be the Messiah, the triumph of the religious establishment over the itinerant preacher and healer from Galilee. Were we there, we too might be mired in the hopelessness of a crucified Lord.

“But,” says Luke, “on the first day of the week at early dawn…” Luke breaks the silence of Holy Saturday and the darkness of Good Friday with a resounding “but” that echoes across the cosmos, across the centuries, and across the cemeteries at which mourners gather, a “but” that heralds Easter’s dawn as surely as the rising of the sun. After the crucifixion

all seems lost, ***but*** on the first day of the week at early dawn…

all seems hopeless, ***but*** on the first day of the week at early dawn…

God seems to have abandoned the world, ***but*** on the first day of the week at early dawn…

the powers of evil seem to have won, ***but*** on the first day of the week at early dawn…

Jesus seems to be dead and gone, ***but*** on the first day of the week at early dawn…

This “but” declares: All is not lost! Death does not have the last word, God does! And God’s word for this day is RESURRECTION!

What seems to be the end is just the beginning. As Stephen Cherry puts it in his book *Barefoot Prayers*:

*Easter changes the map of human understanding….It is not so much out with the old and in with the new as out with the understood and in with the mysterious; out with the limited and in with the unlimited; out with the possible and in with the impossible. To call Easter a revolution is to understate it*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The “but” with which Luke begins this account of Easter day is that inflection point. As the women journey to the tomb with despair in their hearts and death on their minds, they do not recall Jesus telling them that he will rise after three days; they come, not with impossible hopes to see if he has risen, but with heavy hearts resigned to the reality that he is dead. Even when they found the stone rolled away, they did not begin to hope or remember his words. They found it only curious, and curiouser yet when they found his body missing from the place in the tomb where it had been laid. An empty tomb is not proof of a risen Lord; it is proof only of a missing body.

It was then that things began to get a little weird. To that point things had been understood and limited by the bounds of human possibility; people live, people die, people are buried. But suddenly their world changed as the women encountered those two men in dazzling clothes, which Luke presumes even you and I might recognize as angels. Their appearance shakes the women to the core, knocks them off their feet – literally, and stuns them with this message:

*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again*.

“*Then*,” writes Luke, “*they remembered his words*.” Then their world was turned upside down as the impossible suddenly seemed possible, the world as they knew it suddenly awash in mystery. For them, this was a day to remember what Jesus had told them about his rising, an impossible possibility to which they were now living witnesses. Yet, when they told the disciples this good news – what they had seen, what they had heard, that Jesus had risen – the disciples regarded it as “an idle tale,” which is the nice way of saying, “crazy talk.” For, the disciples the impossible was not yet possible, the world still unchanged, Jesus still dead, for they did not yet remember or believe. Even when Peter went to the tomb to see for himself what the women had said, he did not understand or dare to believe it; he went home, “amazed at what had happened” says Luke, though it is unclear that he had any real understanding of what had *really* happened there.

There ends the story at the tomb. Were it the end of the story, we might well be as perplexed as Peter with no understanding of what really happened there. An empty tomb, a missing body, a couple of angels seen by the women – all of it falls short of any real proof of resurrection – possibility of resurrection, perhaps! But without more, resurrection would still be little more than an idle tale! Thankfully, there is more! So often on Easter, our recollection of the story stops when everyone leaves the graveyard. But in Luke’s gospel, the empty tomb is just the beginning of the story of the events of this Easter day. You heard what more happened that day as Luke records it:

Two followers of Jesus encounter him on the Emmaus Road, but do not

recognize him,

Jesus walks with them, opening the Scriptures to them along the way,

they urge Jesus to stay with them as evening is approaching,

at table with them in their home,

Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them,

and their eyes are opened and they recognize him,

and then *poof!* – he is gone.

They walk back the six miles to Jerusalem –

like walking from Staunton to Churchville and then back again –

to tell the disciples what they have experienced – the risen Lord –

and there, Jesus suddenly appears in their midst,

and shows them the marks of the nails

and eats a piece of fish.

These are accounts of a risen Lord, the missing piece in that proof of resurrection. These encounters make this a day to remember, then and now!

Why did the disciples not remember what he had told them about rising on the third day? Was there just too much going on with all the teaching and preaching and healing? Was it too far-fetched to believe? Or were they just not paying attention? Who knows, but what we do know is that it was not until *after* the resurrection, *after* they had found the empty tomb and encountered the angels, *after* they saw the risen Lord himself that they remembered what he had said and dared to believe what we declare this day: THE LORD IS RISEN!

Is that what it takes for you to believe it? Do you need a couple of angels in shining clothes to tell you that good news instead of a preacher with a shining head? Do you need to have Jesus break the bread and hand it to you in person instead of receiving it from the hand of the preacher or the person beside you in the pew? Do you need to touch his nail marks or watch him eat to believe that he has really risen and is not just a ghost? Can you believe what has been told you by the women at the tomb and those two travelers on the Emmaus Road and the disciples and Luke and two thousand years of Christians that may have included your parents and grandparents or saints of this church? Can you believe what you have not seen with your own eyes or heard with your own ears or touched with your own hands? Or is it for you just an idle tale – crazy talk?

A friend told me of a pediatrician who asked to speak at the memorial service for one of his patients, a three-year-old girl. The family consented, and when it was time for him to share his thoughts with the family and community gathered there, he stood and started to read *Big Bird Brings in Spring*. It was the deceased toddler’s favorite book. In the story Big Bird goes to a store and buys an armload of flowers. Big Bird then takes the flowers to a darkened world, brightening the world as he goes by giving a flower to every person he meets along the way. When the pediatrician had finished reading the story, he put down the book and looked at the grieving congregation. “You each hold a flower from this child’s life,” he said quietly. “Spring has come for her and for us.”

At what point did the idle tale of resurrection become truth for that doctor, gospel he could stand and affirm with hope in the face of a child’s death with *Big Bird Brings in Spring*? At what point does it become more than an idle tale for you? For the good news he shared with that congregation of mourners is the hope-filled good news that resounds for mourners of all generations, for people in all places, and for us gathered here today. And that good news is this: Spring has come for all of us, for Jesus Christ is risen! That good news makes this a hope-filled, joyful day to remember with a boatload of alleluias – this Easter day and every day! So let the alleluias resound! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen

1. Stephen Cherry, *Barefoot Prayers*, SPCK: 2013, p.117 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)