

From Certainty to Openness

According to Luke, it is women who go to the tomb early in the morning.¹ These women had been accompanying Jesus and his male disciples for quite a while.² They traveled with Jesus on his journey from Galilee, around Samaria, down to Judea, where they traveled through Jericho and on to Jerusalem. They watched Jesus' trial and crucifixion.³ They witnessed his burial.⁴ And now, they are bringing the spices they have prepared to anoint Jesus' body. They are certain they will find a dead body. An empty tomb isn't in their realm of possibilities.

They are surprised, confused and then terrified when two men suddenly appear. These men seem to glow with light.⁵ The heavenly messengers inform the women that Jesus is alive. They remind the women of what Jesus said and did while they were with him. Because of their experiences with Jesus, they're open to the truth coming from this vision of heavenly messengers.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women know that their talk of the stone rolled away from the tomb, and of the two men in bright clothing saying Jesus has risen from the dead, will sound like nonsense to anyone who wasn't there. Yet the women faithfully report what they have seen and heard to the eleven disciples and all the others. And, not surprisingly, the men don't believe their incredible story.

The closest followers of Jesus are certain the women's story is an idle tale, fiction, a lie, drivel, nonsense. Worst case scenario, they dismiss the story because they don't think it's possible for women to be credible witnesses. Not even these women who have been traveling with them as they accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. Best case scenario, they dismiss what the women tell them because it's an incredible story. They're certain that dead people stay dead.

Resurrection turns the world upside-down. It should be hard to believe.

Luke tells us that Peter decides to go and see for himself. Maybe Peter does this so he can prove how delusional the women are. Perhaps he does this because he's open to the possibility that they may be right, but he needs to see it for himself. When he enters the open tomb and sees the linen cloths, but no body, he's convinced that Jesus is alive. He now understands he won't find Jesus in the place of the dead.

As I read Luke's account of the resurrection of Jesus, two questions come to mind. The first, of course, is the one the women are asked when they go to the tomb and find it empty. Why do you look for the living among the dead? Jesus' friends were filled with fear and sadness when they discovered the empty tomb. They were looking for Jesus "among the dead" and needed to be reminded of all that he had taught them.

¹ This sermon draws from <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/palmc>; April Yamasaki, "Who Are These Women to Say Such Things," <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/speak-out-luke-241-12>; "Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2022," *Leader: Winter 2021-2022*, MennoMedia, p. 48; "Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2019," *Leader: Winter 2018-19*, MennoMedia, p. 50; and Jim Friedrich, "Preaching on Easter Sunday Isn't about Convincing People," <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/preaching-easter-sunday-isn-t-about-convincing-people>.

² Luke 8:1-3

³ Luke 23:49

⁴ Luke 23:55

⁵ Luke 24:4, *The Voice*

We also have been taught about – and by – Jesus. We read the stories about his birth; about his life of teaching, healing, and loving; about his death, burial and resurrection. We know that Jesus is among us, the living; however, we don't always see Christ in those we encounter. Instead, we sometimes dismiss them and their idle stories. We aren't open to what we can learn from them. Sometimes we see them as adversaries.

Why do you look for the living among the dead? Why do you seek life among dead ends? We want to cling to what we know – the certainty of death – instead of being open to what we don't know – the possibility of resurrection. We tend to follow the status quo rather than to risk the unknown. We look to dead ideals and dead customs for new life instead of creatively venturing forth into the new thing God is doing.

Why do you look for the living among the dead? Where is Jesus now, for you? Where might God be asking you to notice new life? Jesus is alive, still showing up as a transforming presence in a world fraught with grief, confusion, and fear. As we move through life, we continue to discover who we are now and who we must become, in the light of the risen Christ.

The second question arising from Luke's resurrection account is related to the reactions of various people to the news that Jesus is alive. Who is a credible witness? The women, and the men too, were reminded of the words of Jesus. They then proclaimed what they saw, heard, and remembered. The resurrection is made real in both the proclamation and the remembering of Jesus' life. We proclaim what we see, hear, and remember. Whose stories do we need to listen to? Who is sharing surprising, grace-filled experiences? When have we made the mistake of dismissing such stories as idle tales?

Who is a credible witness? Life-giving news comes from unexpected people in unexpected ways. The women spoke up, even when they weren't believed. In what ways have you spoken up when you have witnessed resurrection, when you have seen and experienced the incredible, impossible love and grace of God?

Who is a credible witness? It's not a matter of proving the details of the resurrection. Even the four gospel writers don't agree on the details of this incredible story. It's interesting to note that Jesus doesn't appear in Luke's telling of the empty tomb. In the Gospel of Luke, his first resurrection appearance is on the walk to Emmaus. We'll read that story next week. Matters of faith are never finally proven. Faith isn't generated by an irrefutable argument. Faith grows by being open to the wonder of the impossible, extravagant love and grace of God that is embodied in the resurrected Christ.

Faith is communicated by witness. The believer's life is a testimony to the risen-ness of Jesus. We demonstrate that Jesus is not dead by living a life in which Jesus is the never-failing source of affirmation, challenge, enrichment and enlargement.

The Easter story reminds us to be open to being continually transformed. It invites us to surrender our certainties that falsely place limitations on God and to join the psalmist in praise: *I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*⁶

Each Sunday during the season of Lent we have recalled the words of God found in Isaiah: *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*⁷ As we seek God's way, may we move from the confidence of knowing how things are to the unsettling openness of realizing God's ways are beyond what we can imagine.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁶ Psalm 118:21-23, *New Revised Standard Version*

⁷ Isaiah 55:9, *New Revised Standard Version*