

I BELIEVE... AND IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

I'd like to begin the sermon this morning by taking some time to talk about the way Luke tells the Easter story. Earlier, we read the first 12 verses of Luke 24, but that's not the whole story. Here's a summary of how Luke tells it:

1. The women go to the tomb and find it empty. Two men (probably angels) suddenly appear and tell them that Jesus has risen. The women told everyone what they'd experienced, but no one believed them. Peter went to the tomb and also found it empty, but he still doesn't appear to have believed the women.
2. Jesus first shows up on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, where he finds a couple disciples talking about all the events of the last few days. He talks to them for quite a while before they clue in to who he is. (We'll be reading this part of the story next week.) They ran back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples what had happened.
3. As the other disciples are telling them about their experience, Jesus shows up among the disciples where they were all gathered and they think he's a ghost (which is interesting, given what the women had told them and given the fact that the two guys who met him on the road to Emmaus were just at that moment telling everyone about their encounter). Finally, after showing them all his hands, where the nails had gone in, and his side where the spear had pierced him after he'd died, and after eating with them (everyone knows ghosts don't eat), and after opening their minds to understand what had happened and how it all connected to Scripture, they seem to have finally believed and understood.

You might be surprised by Luke's version of events. It's a bit different from the way the other gospel writers tell the story. Does that mean Luke got it wrong? Or that the other gospel writers got it wrong? Quite some time had passed, after all, between when all this happened and when the gospels were written.

This is one of the challenges of reading the gospels in the 21st century. We tend to think that writing history, or writing biographies, is akin to writing a police report, in that we tend to think the most important thing is to get every last detail exact (and we tend to think it's possible to get every last detail exact, even though witnesses are notorious for experiencing and remembering things differently).

In the ancient world, it was common practice to do things like compressing the speeches and activities of famous people so they could reasonably be written and read. We see this all through the gospels. We know that Jesus sometimes taught for hours, but we don't have any sermons or teachings that take that long to read. That's because what was important wasn't that every single detail was exact – that the speech was reported verbatim, but that the essence of what Jesus said and did was accurate. They didn't make things up; they simply did what they could to capture Jesus' meaning, without requiring a word-for-word recording. And we can say with absolute certainty that all the gospels agree when it comes to understanding Jesus' meaning and life.

This is true for the Easter story as well. Details, like how many angels were at the tomb and whether it was just Peter, or Peter and John who went to look after the women returned, or even

which of the women were there, aren't actually important. The thing that's important is that the tomb was empty because Jesus had been raised from the dead. That is the same no matter what version of events we're reading. Also, what's important is that the risen Jesus appeared to all sorts of people in the flesh before returning to his Father. Luke's version of events isn't wrong. It's true, as are Mark's, Matthew's, and John's. Sometimes there are differences because they spoke to different witnesses. Sometimes there are differences because they're writing to different audiences who understand things differently, and so need things communicated differently.¹ But the overall story – the events that happened, the meaning underlying it all – that does not change from one gospel to the next.

I say all of this to hopefully help us not be sidetracked by the differences, but instead be able to focus on the event itself. A group of women went to the tomb early in the morning, as soon as they were able, and found the tomb empty. Because Jesus was no longer dead. Jesus was alive. Jesus IS alive. That's the focus. That's the point of the story. That's the thing we celebrate.

Back in the ancient world, people often didn't believe women. It wasn't strange for the disciples to think they were talking nonsense. Women were generally considered to be unreliable witnesses. They weren't even allowed to testify in court because they were so unreliable. But we, I hope, don't have any such issues with women. We hear the women telling us that they went to the tomb and found it empty. We hear them telling us that two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning spoke to them, telling them that Jesus had risen and that all the events that had led up to this morning had been foretold. The crucifixion and death were expected and necessary. And we are left with the same choice the other disciples were left with: Will we believe these women, or will we, like the other disciples, consider their testimony to be nonsense?

Let's listen again to the way Luke tells us what happened. As I read, are there things that stand out for you? Is there anything that grabs at your imagination? Anything specific that the Holy Spirit might be trying to say to you or ask you?

From Luke 24:1 – 12:

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with 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; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Hearing this story... What do you think? Do you believe the women? Do you believe they found the tomb empty? Do you believe they encountered angels who told them Jesus had been raised from the dead?

Do you believe the angels? (Luke doesn't tell us they are angels, but I think their description as men in clothes that gleamed like lightening, as well as their sudden appearance, means we're supposed to infer they were angels.) Do you believe them that Jesus was raised from the dead?

That's a question we all need to answer. Do we believe this story? Do we believe that Jesus wasn't in the tomb because he had been raised from the dead? For some of us, the answer is a resounding *Yes!* For some of us, the answer is *No*. And for some of us, the answer is much like the father who brought his son to Jesus to be healed, and said to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!"ⁱⁱⁱ

Even for those of us who believe without a shadow of a doubt, there's another question that I think is just as important as the first. You see, Jesus wasn't the first person to be raised from the dead. Not so long before, Jesus' friend Lazarus had died and been buried. And then Jesus showed up and called him out of his tomb. And Lazarus lived again.ⁱⁱⁱ Eight or nine hundred years before Jesus, the prophet Elijah was staying with a widow and her young son, when that child died. Elijah prayed for the boy and God raised him back to life.^{iv} There are other stories of people raised from the dead, as well. But in none of those cases do those people's resurrections make even a bit of difference to my life or your life – to our lives.

So yes, the first question might be: Do we believe Jesus was raised from the dead? But that's not the only question. The question we must also ask, I think, is this: So what? So what that Jesus was raised from the dead? What does that have to do with us? What difference does his resurrection make in our lives? This, I think is such an essential question.

I imagine that many of us are quick to respond with an answer to the *so what*. We've heard it over and over again. Every time we attend a Christian funeral, we're reminded of the *so what*. Because Jesus was raised from the dead to live eternally with God, we who believe will also be raised from the dead to live eternally with God. Don't we cling to that? I know I do. I know I believe it. I genuinely believe my mom, who died three years ago, is alive and in perfect health, freed from sin and death, living in the presence of God himself, singing with the angels and the saints who went before. (My mom loved to sing,) I believe a day will come when I will see her again; when I will also be living, perfected, in God's presence for all eternity. And I believe a day will come when you will see the people you love, who you've lost to death, also perfected and freed and worshipping at the throne of God Almighty. That is the *so what* of Jesus' resurrection. As the song says, death was arrested^v – death was robbed of all its power and all its victory. So many of us cling to this truth. We ask: So what? Who cares that Jesus was raised from the dead? What difference does that make in my life? This is the difference it makes.

The Apostle Paul wrote of this truth in his first letter to the Corinthians. They were having some difficulty with the whole resurrection thing. And Paul had a few things to say about it. I'd like to read for you some of what he wrote. It's in 1 Corinthians 15. We read part of it earlier. I'd like to read beginning at verse 12:

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain, and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ... ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have died. ²¹ For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being...

Because Jesus rose from the dead after having conquered sin on the cross, we too can be freed from sin and death. We too will be raised from the dead, not exactly like Jesus was – we are raised to new life with Jesus, not back with those we left behind when we died. But we are raised to life – eternal life in the presence of our God who is Love. Can you imagine? To live in such a presence? To live without anything – any sin or anything else – coming between us and that divine love? It's as the old hymn says:

When with the ransomed in glory,
His face I at last shall see,
'Twill be my joy through the ages
To sing of his love for me.
How marvelous! How wonderful.
Is my Saviour's love for me!^{vi}

So what that Jesus rose from the dead? So all of this!

But, here's a thing I think we sometimes forget, but that makes it all even so much more marvelous – so much more wonderful:

Jesus' resurrection doesn't just impact our death – our life after death. Jesus' resurrection makes a difference in this life as well. Think about that for a moment: If you know that death is not the end; if you know that when this body dies, you will be given a new body, freed from sin and the decay of human biology, what does that mean for how you live your life right now? I think this is what Jesus was talking about that time he and his disciples were in a boat during a storm and the disciples were super scared and Jesus was sleeping; when they woke him up, Jesus said this: Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?^{vii}

I think Jesus was reminding them that death wasn't to be feared. Yes, he also demonstrated that he had power even over the storm. He had compassion for them in their fear. He stopped the storm with a word. He may have been rebuking their lack of faith in his power in the here-and-now, but I am convinced that he was also speaking of the greater fear that he would overcome – the fear of death itself.

Can you imagine living life without fear? Can you imagine being so firmly grounded in your faith in Jesus and in his resurrection, that you have no fear? Paul wrote of fighting with wild animals at Ephesus – and whether he meant that literally or figuratively, his point is the same: it

was his faith in Jesus that gave him the strength and the hope required to fight.^{viii} He's not talking here of fighting just for the sake of fighting. He's talking about facing the persecution and violence that many followers of Jesus in his day faced. He's talking about the strength and hope required to continue to walk the way of Jesus and proclaim the truth of Jesus in a world that was decidedly hostile to that message – a world in which the threat of death was not an idle threat. Paul quite literally faced death over and over again. And he could do so because of Jesus' resurrection – because he knew death had been arrested.

But is that the only impact of Jesus' resurrection in the here-and-now? Because if it is, let's be honest, it's not really that special for most of us. I mean, yes, it is a powerful thing to not be afraid of death. And we all face death – that's the reality of these human bodies in which we reside. But we don't go out looking for it the way Paul did. We aren't in danger of losing our lives because we've chosen to follow Jesus. At least, not in this part of the world.

So how else do we answer the question: What difference does Jesus' resurrection make in our lives? Are there any other answers? Does Jesus' resurrection make a difference in our lives here-and-now?

When Paul met Jesus and believed in his resurrection, everything changed for him. The entire focus and direction of his life changed. He was literally on the road to Damascus, hunting Jesus' followers to bring them to justice for their blasphemy and heresy. He met Jesus and became one of those followers. It was an abrupt 180° turn. He had clarity about God's mission in the world. He understood Jesus' role in that mission. He was motivated to join with Jesus in God's mission in the world. His focus was unwavering, even in the face of death.

Peter went from being a bit of a bumbling, hot-headed, regular guy to preaching sermons that saw thousands come to faith in Jesus. He walked away from the family business and remained, to his death, focused on spreading the truth about Jesus, inviting others to also become Jesus' followers, and encouraging those who were followers of Jesus to faithfully live as such.

There are countless stories over the last 2,000 years that tell of women and men whose lives were equally impacted by their faith in Jesus – to the point that their faith shaped everything they did. They understood God's mission of reconciliation, salvation, and redemption in the world, and they joined in with everything they had. Jesus' resurrection wasn't just important because it gave them hope that they would have life after death. Jesus' resurrection was important because it impacted everything about their lives in the here-and-now.

What about us? Does Jesus' resurrection make a difference to our lives? Does Jesus' resurrection make a difference to your life? Maybe this is a question you could spend some time reflecting on this coming week...

I want to say something else about resurrection, that I think we sometimes forget. Resurrection requires death. It required Jesus' death. It also requires our death. It requires our death literally, but I also think it requires our death in all sorts of figurative ways.

When Jesus was talking to his disciples about his upcoming death and resurrection, he said this:

²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit... ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.^{ix}

“Whoever serves me must follow me.” Think for a moment about what that means. We talk about following Jesus as following the way he lived. But doesn’t that mean putting to death all the things in this life that are not part of following Jesus? Things like our selfishness and pride, our greed and hate, all the things that are contrary to Jesus? Is it not required that we put those things to death if we are to experience the life Jesus promised?

In Matthew 16, immediately after Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah and then went on to rebuke Jesus for talking about his upcoming suffering and death, Jesus said this:

²⁴ If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.^x

Jesus wasn’t just talking about end-of-life stuff. He was talking about life in the here-and-now. He was talking about all the things we must be willing to crucify if we are to truly be his followers. What is the cross you must take up? I’m not talking here about the regular suffering that is part of life regardless of whether or not you are Jesus’ follower. I’m talking about the kinds of things that are directly connected to being Jesus’ follower. Maybe it’s how you face death in your own life. Maybe it’s how you cling to hope in the face of others’ sickness and death. Maybe it’s about living life in such a way as to take time to rest in God. Maybe it’s about what we prioritize. Maybe it’s about how we spend our money or our time. Maybe it’s about who we love or about who we deem worthy of love. What is the cross you must take up? What is it that needs to be crucified so you can experience the new life in Jesus?

We usually think about this in terms of things we must let die. But I would suggest that when we let these things die – things that are part of who we are – it is as if we were dying. If I live my life in such a way that I never rest – that I never stop being busy, that I never practice sabbath – then to crucify that busyness is tantamount to crucifying myself. If I live my life in such a way that I am anxious and afraid, and then am asked to crucify that anxiety and fear, it is tantamount to crucifying myself. Because without that anxiety and fear, or without that busyness, I will be a different person. I might not even know who I will be. It will be as if I have died and being resurrected to new life.

The good news of Easter is certainly that when we die, literally, we will be raised to new life in the eternal presence of our God who is love. The good news of Easter is also that when we put to death those things about us that are not like Jesus – those things that so define us that putting them to death is like dying ourselves – the good news of Easter is that losing these things we cling to, that are not of Jesus, we do not die, but live more fully, more abundantly, than ever before. In a sense we are resurrected.

The old song says it for us:

Because he lives, I can face tomorrow.
Because he lives, all fear is gone.

We can face death because he lives. But we can also face life because he lives.

That, I think, is the real invitation of Easter. There is an incredible security that comes with knowing we can face death because he lives. But we can also face life because he lives.

ⁱ To read a bit more on the differences in the various gospel accounts, it might be helpful to read [this short article](#) by Cale Clark from April 2019, titled “Why Are the Bible’s Easter Accounts Different” on the Catholic Answers website. (<https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/why-are-the-bibles-easter-accounts-different>)

ⁱⁱ Mark 9:24.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 11:38 – 44.

^{iv} 1 Kings 17:17 – 24.

^v *Death Was Arrested*, written by Heath Balltzglier, Brandon Coker, Adam Kersh, & Paul Taylor Smith. © Seems Like Music | Adam Kersh Music | Bcoker Music | Centricity Songs | Paul Taylor Smith Publishing \ Music at North point. C.C.L.I. Song #7046448.

^{vi} *I Stand Amazed*, by Charles H. Gabriel. Public Domain. C.C.L.I. Song #25297.

^{vii} Mark 4:35 – 41.

^{viii} See 1 Corinthians 15:30 – 32.

^{ix} John 12:24 – 26.

^x Matthew 16:24 – 25.