

“Seeing, Believing”

Date: 21 April 2019

Text: Luke 24: 1 - 12

Rev. Peter Coutts

When you stop to think about it, it was a peculiar way to return. It was. After all, this was very Son of God, rising from three days of death. One might anticipate that there should be a cosmic lightshow and divine drama. Jesus birth warranted a choir of angels! Surely this should get more! God was changing the fabric of history for all time. And its first announcement was... nothing. Nothing! An empty tomb. A star was not born, but gone. Luke's account says the women who made the discovery were perplexed. John's account says they assumed it was grave robbers. When Mary saw her resurrected Lord she guessed He was the gardener. Despite Jesus' teachings, no one was prepared for reality. And when reality came they couldn't see it. But... how could they be prepared? What happened was so unreal.

We are so familiar with this story that we can't appreciate how hard it would be for them to believe. They knew death was a one-way street, and they had watched Jesus be killed. So when Mary Magdelene came back with the news, "He is risen!", would they... could they simply accept what she said as true? No. In that day in their legal system a woman could not be a witness in a trial. They were seen as having no credibility. We read today that the apostles took the women's story as nothing more than an idle tale, and dismissed it. But two of the apostles ran back to check things for themselves. John, we read, believed, based on nothing more than folded grave linens and an empty tomb. Peter, it seems, may have withheld judgment.

No fanfare. No angel choir. No lightshow nor drama. Just an empty tomb. But maybe drama was not what was needed in the situation. In great contrast, Jesus' approach to breaking the news of His own resurrection was subtle, gentle, personal, careful. He walked with two of his followers on the road to Emmaus, interpreting the events of the last few days to them, teaching them about the Jewish Messianic expectations. And only after a few hours together did they finally realize who this was they were talking to! Mary told the apostles, "I have seen him!" Now these two returned to the apostles and said, "We have seen him too!" Could it be true? They would have been asking themselves this, debating it. Could it actually be true? John already believed so. Perhaps Peter as well. Thomas thought it was nuts. But it was only after this discussion was well underway that Jesus revealed himself to the eleven huddled together in that locked room. Yet even with the idea of resurrection planted in their heads, Luke tells us that they were still "startled and terrified". How could you not be. This kind of thing did not happen. It was miraculous.

Yet even after this moment Jesus still pursued the personal touch. Jesus turned to Thomas and said, “I undersand you need concrete evidence. Here, examine my wounds”. Some wondered if this might be a ghost. So a few days later, Jesus hosted a beach BBQ of broiled fish. He himself ate some, dealing this that suspicion. But for some, even these things weren’t enough. Matthew tells us that some six weeks later, after many appearances, that at the time of Jesus’ ascension into heaven that there were still some who doubted.

And we find that hard to understand. How could they doubt? They had every advantage that we don’t! They could see him, touch him, listen to him! By comparison, here we are, some two thousand years distant from that moment, and we believe! But that is one of the miracles of Easter. And that is this: we believe! After Jesus showed his wounds to Thomas, and Thomas believed, Jesus said this: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those... BLESSED ARE THOSE... who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29).

That, my friends, is us. We are the blessed ones. Today we see the empty tomb and know the reason: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, conquered death, rose from the grave and now lives eternally for our sake. For us. Faith is a gift. That, in itself, is a miracle. Faith, in part, is our hope that all that the resurrection implies will be true too: forgiveness for sin, reconciliation with God, the benefits of life lived with God here and now, the promise of eternal life with God beyond our own death. Faith, in part, is our trust that this story is true. And it is what makes our own appreciation of Jesus real. Faith can make Jesus as real to us here and now as he was to Mary in the garden. As Living Faith puts it, because of this “by faith we receive the very life of God into our lives, and joyfully discover that God knows, loves and pardons us” (6.1.1). In other words, that hope, trust, and lived faith brings us again and again to God, assuring us of this truth: that Christ is risen! So today we can look at the empty tomb and say “Christ has risen indeed!”

But we know that not all people see it this way. Not everyone believes. For years I anticipated the edition of Mcleans Magazine that came out at Easter time. For years the theme was “cast doubt on the resurrection.” In 2004 the cover declared: “What we know about Jesus: questions about who Christ really was.” In 2006 the cover declared “Did he really die on the cross?”. In 2007 the cover asked “Is God poison?”. My favourite was in 2008, when the cover declared “Scholars are casting new doubt on the divinity of Jesus – and even wondering if the church would be better off without him (Happy Easter)”. The last such cover was in 2016, which asked the question, “Did Jesus Really Exist?” The goal of all these articles was to turn Jesus into a controversial story (and so sell magazines)

But each article challenged faith. It must cause the magazine’s founder to roll in his grave every spring: John Bayne Maclean, a proud Presbyterian.

One year the Mclean's article was a book review of a respected historian's biography of Jesus. The reviewer was highly critical of the book. He wrote, "In a nutshell: human events have human or natural agency (miracles are not, cannot be, explanations)... In the case of the historical Jesus, the evidence simply doesn't exist".

And, of course, the author is right... somewhat. Outside the Bible the evidence for Jesus is scant. And inside the Bible is a story so unreal that those closest to Jesus found it hard to believe, even as he stood before them in the flesh. No wonder so many find it hard to believe in the resurrection today. The apostle Thomas is the prototype for our age: they want the evidence. They want the resurrection as if it was brought to you by Las Vegas. The story can take any of us only so far on its own. God can nudge us along through the Spirit. We can wrestle intellectually with what it means. But in the end it takes what Kierkegaard called "the leap of faith". And that leap puts one on a new path, that takes one ever more close to the risen One. But it is a leap. And we can help, by holding our our hand.

The revered English Biblical historian, N.T. Wright, put it this way. "Faith can't be forced, but unfaith can be challenged. That is how it has always been, from the very beginning, when people have borne witness to Jesus' resurrection". The empty tomb poses a question, "Why is it empty?" Mary saying "I have seen him!" is a challenge to unfaith. The men who hurried back from Emmaus saying "we have seen him too" is a challenge to unfaith. The apostles experience of the risen Jesus is a challenge to unfaith. And... who we are, our belief, our changed lives, our experience of God, that is a challenge to unfaith too. Because every Christian worshipping on this day is declaring by their very act of worship that they have looked into the empty tomb and know, with certainty, that Christ is raised indeed! N.T. Wright is right: unfaith is challenged, as it always has been, by the people who bear witness to Jesus' resurrection. It sounds an awful lot like how Jesus helped his closest friends believe that he was back from the grave. It was not through divine drama and earth-shattering evidence. Jesus' approach was personal and care-filled. And that is to be our approach too.

Why? The answer C.S. Lewis gave to this question is right on the money, as he so often was. He wrote, "If there was no resurrection, then the life of Jesus is irrelevant. But if there was a resurrection, then the life of Jesus is infinitely relevant". That's what eventually dawned on the disciples once they got beyond their shock and awe over the resurrection... once they got beyond they joy in seeing their friend alive again. They began to think, "Wow! Do you know what this means? Do you know what this implies? Not just for us, but for the whole world! We have to tell them!" And so they did.

And so we do.

In the life we live for Him.

He is risen indeed!