

March 31st, 2024
Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12 “And I Hope”

He is risen! The wait is over. The highest holy day of the Christian year is here. Jayna Powell, retired director of Disciples Homeland Ministries used to say, “We are a church of the resurrection! Let’s live like we believe it!” As much as we talk about the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus, ultimately, we affirm and serve the Risen Christ. It’s in our name. We are the Christian Church (Disciples of *Christ*). We are a movement that believes that “in essentials there is unity, in non-essentials there is liberty, and in all things there is charity.” Because this is one of our core values, you’ll likely hear all sorts of explanations and interpretations concerning the definition of the “Risen Christ.” And that’s fine. There is room for discussion about these opinions in our tradition, but not in worship. What is important in our worship is confessing the Risen Christ and affirming that the resurrection is the ultimate manifestation of God’s love. We don’t gather for worship to sift through biological and archaeological data to prove to the world beyond all shadow of a doubt that Jesus rose from the dead in a particular way. We’re not here to participate in the theological gymnastics of Christian apologists who spend their whole lives crafting irrefutable arguments to prove their beliefs. We are here to bear witness to what the risen Christ has done for us and to proclaim “He is risen!”

For the duration of our Lenten season, we’ve been focusing on Jesus’ disciple Peter who, according to Jesus’ words, was the rock upon which his church would be built. It’s been interesting experiencing Jesus’ ministry through Peter’s viewpoint. Peter shows us a steady faith that persists even after high mountain peaks and deep valleys. Peter literally dropped everything to follow Jesus. He put his trust in Jesus and Jesus put his trust in Peter. Peter was the first to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. Peter followed Jesus through crowds of sick and hungry people bearing witness to healing miracles. But Peter

also balked at the idea that Jesus' ministry would end with his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. Peter and the other disciples could not even stay awake to watch over Jesus as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. When he finally did wake up, Peter drew his sword when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus. Peter denied Christ three times. Peter was not even present when Jesus died. But as we heard in this morning's text, Peter *ran* to the tomb which shows us that no matter what happens, we can always begin again. Here's a question I want us to consider this morning: Did Peter run to the tomb because he believed or because he doubted?

Let's look at the setting for this week's scripture from Luke's gospel: On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the "the women who had come with him from Galilee" go to the tomb and find it empty. Good news, right? Maybe. They were expecting to find a dead body because the gospel writer says they had prepared "spices" and brought them to the tomb to care for one they assumed was dead. When they got there, the stone to the tomb had been rolled away which confused them. We get that feeling sometimes when we walk into a familiar place, but something isn't right. It feels "off." Things aren't where they're supposed to be. Something looks or sounds or smells out of place. Last year when the church was broken into, something wasn't right about the way my key fit into the office door. Then when I opened it, something didn't feel right about the way the door opened. That's when I noticed that the molding around the door frame was broken. It still didn't occur to me that someone kicked the door in. It was the last thing on my mind. It wasn't until I stepped into my office and saw that my furniture had been rearranged and the vent cover for the kitchen swamp cooler was sitting neatly on my chair that I finally thought, "Someone broke in!" It took me a while to get enough information to understand what happened.

The same must have been true for the women at the tomb. They knew something was "off." They just weren't sure *what* was "off." Then when they finally saw the messengers in the tomb, they were terrified, and

rightly so. These messengers wore dazzling clothes. They said, “He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Rise again. There. Now they had enough information to put it together. Verse eight says, “*Then* they remembered his words and his assurances.”

Then they returned to the disciples with their good news hoping that *they* “remembered his words and assurances” too. But what do the disciples say? Luke writes, “But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” These aren’t just words of disbelief. This is outright dismissal! While some translations render their reaction as “an idle tale,” others say, “foolish talk,” or “nonsense.” The Greek word is a lot more blunt. The Greek word means, “rubbish.” So, these women came to tell his closest apostles that Jesus’ promise had been fulfilled and their response is, “yeah, well, that’s a bunch of rubbish.” There is so much truth and honesty in this reaction. After all, good news often seems too good to be true. That’s what we tell our kids so they don’t get scammed, right? “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn’t true.”

If the tomb is empty, if Jesus has been raised from the dead, then life as we’ve known and expected it has changed completely. As Luke writes in the Book of Acts, “The world has been turned upside down.” And if the world has been turned upside down, how can we even know how to live? If the disciples thought the resurrection was rubbish, what are people going to think when we confess our belief in the resurrection? “Could it really be true?” is the question I think Peter asked himself. Then with hope on his heels, he ran to the tomb to see for himself. And then he goes home wondering. Here’s the heart of this lesson: That wondering Peter had is where the meaning of the resurrection lies. The resurrection only makes sense when we remain amazed, marveling and wondering at the love of God that reversed death itself. We are not asked to explain the resurrection, or offer proof for the resurrection, or make a case for the resurrection. Instead, like Peter, we live in wonder over how belief in the God of resurrection truly can change the world. That’s what

it means to be a Disciple. Again, as I said earlier, we're not going to change the world by coming up with the best ontological argument for "proving" that Jesus was resurrected in a particular way. As I've said before, if a team of archaeologists found a giant boat on the top of a mountain with "Noah was here" carved into the hull, the whole world isn't going to drop everything and say, "Wow! I guess the Bible was right after all! Better shape up and get right with God!" It's okay to live in wonder. The burden of proof is not ours. The most important thing we can do is live like the resurrection matters, and that's what we affirm in our church.

Back to the question on the table this morning – "Did Peter run to the tomb because he believes or because he has doubts?" Honestly, for me it doesn't matter *why* he goes because it's the tenacity of hope that drives him there. Once he sees the strips of linen on the ground, he safely arrives back home and is filled with awe and amazement. Even after his biggest failures, even after the worst-case scenario has happened, he is still able to run towards hope. So what about us? Will we, like Peter, keep going? Will we keep looking for God in our midst? To which I say, "Of course we will." That's what it means to be a church of the resurrection. We are not judged or defined by our failures or our successes. God does not keep a ledger of our past deeds good or bad.

Years ago, Kevin Zeitler and I used to talk about how churches get so bogged down in perfectionism. Churches often think we need to do things a particular way and that there's no room to adjust to the glitches that will inevitably happen. At the time, we had two services in our church – one was at 8:30 in the chapel and the other at 10:30 in the sanctuary. The early service was very laid back. If someone mispronounced a word while reading scripture, or if we accidentally sang "Here I Am" on page 654 in the hymn book instead of "Here I Am, Lord" on page 452 we brushed it off and laughed. We'd say, "Hey, it's a fail-free zone!" In fact, that's why most of the people who came to first service attended in the first place. They appreciated the more casual setting. They'd say, "It just seems like whenever something goes wrong

in second service, people feel embarrassed and awkward and that vibe spreads everywhere. So Kevin and I said, “If this fail-free zone is like a bubble that we’ve created here in the chapel, maybe we need to extend that bubble so it encompasses the sanctuary too!” We got some pushback on that idea though. Someone said, “If we treat worship as a fail-free zone, people won’t strive for perfection and then the quality of our worship will decrease, and people will stop coming to church.” Okay. I get that. And if worship is just a performance, then I can see where that would be an issue. But worship is not a performance! Worship is an opportunity to come as we are and love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. If we allow perfectionism to drive us, we miss the opportunity to experience the fullness of God’s grace. We miss out on the opportunity to let God mold us and shape us into the image of Christ. The truth is, we’re all like Peter. Sometimes we shine and sometimes we stumble. Sometimes we do both at the same time! But when we live with the hope that Peter demonstrated when he ran to the tomb ... when we live like the resurrection matters ... when we stop comparing, and judging and blaming and shaming we are transformed, like Peter, into the rock steady church that Christ envisioned.