

Not Out of the Woods Yet: Responding to an Empty Tomb

Luke 24:1-12

He was dead. Jesus, their hope, teacher, and maybe Messiah had been crucified—the victim of the great power of Rome. His life had ended like so many hoped for saviors before him. Yet many of the followers of Jesus were making outlandish claims—that Jesus was alive and that they had seen him and experienced his presence.

On the third day after the crucifixion, and as stories were being constructed and passed around among the believers, writers had to find a new language to express the truth believers had come to understand about Jesus. Theirs was a developing understanding about Jesus though it was not exactly the same for all believers, even for all four of the gospels.

The language they chose came from Jewish theology's expectation that, at the end of time, the end of the world, everyone who had died and was buried would be brought out of their graves face judgment. Then they would face an eternity either of reward or punishment. This concept of resurrection meant that everyone, at the end of time, would be raised all at once in preparation for eternal life. Christian writers borrowed the language of resurrection and applied it to Jesus. There was a startling shift in meaning because they claimed that this end of time phenomenon applying to all people had actually taken place in the middle of time and applied to just one person—Jesus.

Easter was not about the resuscitation the mutilated body of a crucified man, but about the translation of Jesus into the dimension of eternity. He was out of time yet also present. The Gospel writers used several important images to convey this message. There was an empty tomb and there were angels and witnesses. There were also resurrection appearances of Jesus that were sometimes very physical, touchable, and hungry. Other times, he was metaphysical—disappeared and reappeared instantaneously and passed through walls. These were attempts with symbolic language, in time and space, to describe the phenomenon of heaven, of eternity.

Today is Easter Sunday, a celebration of new life and the end of death. But Easter did begin in a cemetery where Jesus was buried. Easter began with an empty tomb. And this is still true today. The new quality of life we call resurrection is life in the kingdom of God—heaven in our hearts. And life in God's own life always begins in the reality of death.

Death and resurrection comprise the rhythm of our lives. Today I have the honor of sharing with you several experiences of death leading to resurrection. Some of the members here at Crossroads Church have allowed me to share part of their story. Our sister Celsea lost her mother a few months ago. She died just before Christmas. Getting so caught up with all the logistics of funeral and family somewhat muted Celsea's own grief process. She took care of everything and everyone, but herself.

Celsea is expecting her first child and said that the pregnancy helped her focus. She was strong for the baby. Yes, there was grief with the knowledge that her mother would not be around for her grandchild, yet there was also a strong sense that somehow Celsea's mother and her own

unborn child are together, close with each other now. There is comfort in the sense of this connection of one who just left this world and one just preparing to enter it are with each other now. There is new life in that belief and that hope. It puts life in perspective as so much bigger than we think.

We know that death takes many forms in our lives other than physical death. Our brother Paul wrote of his own death to resurrection experience:

I was at the lowest point in my life. It was about seventeen years ago when my twenty-year marriage crumbled along with my methods and tricks for keeping myself and my anxiety at bay. I was totally lost and while I had friends, none were in on my real 'secrets' and 'all' of me. I could see no future with any light in it at all. As I wandered in this desert, undirected steps led me to attend a couple of church services for the first time in my life. With that came therapy and with that came an open door to Broadway Church (Crossroads' parent congregation). I found what gave me rebirth in a really powerful way. The combination of community, teaching sermons, and moving musical praise resurrected me. That has grown from a light to a way of life. Now I have my beloved wife Cynthia, my Crossroads Church community, and the closest group of friends to whom I can now tell my secrets. I have truly gone from being a miserable single soul to a man of true community and belonging.

We heard Luke's gospels version of the resurrection story. Luke's telling of that first Easter morning had an interesting twist. Believers who witnessed the empty tomb did not all respond the same way. The women were the first to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with burial spices, in the Jewish tradition, but found no body inside the tomb. There were two men in dazzling outfits, angels with a message for the women: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? [Jesus] is not here, but has risen." But when they brought this unexpected, and pretty spectacular, news to Jesus' disciples, the reaction was not what the women had hoped. The disciples did not believe them. Good old Peter at least got up and went to the tomb himself. He was amazed and probably confused, but instead of doing anything, he just went home. Peter would soon be transformed, would grasp the truth of Jesus in the depths of his heart and soul—and it changed his life.

Resurrection is all about the transformation of our perspectives. It is about grasping this life in depths of our heart and soul. Our Crossroads sister Sarah wrote about such a transformation in her life:

At his birth, and for two or three years afterwards, we did not know that our son, Chris, had any special problems. But by age four, with speech and behavior becoming an evident problem, we got the diagnosis: autism. It was devastating. All our dreams for our son – changed. We had signed him up for a preschool class in the fall. I had to call them and tell them that our son would be going to another school. Family life was chaotic – with increasing incidents in public, like the night he tore down the movie screen at a game arcade... Or the time he visited a Catholic church down the street on a Sunday. The people had just heard the gospel story of the Prodigal son, who goes out and squanders his father's money, when in came Chris, barefoot and no shirt, walking right down the middle aisle. People thought it was some kind of skit. I thought I had been given more than I could handle!

Over the years, we gradually adjusted to new goals for him. Our family life basically revolved around what Chris would tolerate, or where we could bring him without a scene. His older brother had many embarrassing episodes of things like Chris streaking (naked) through the yard when he had his friends over. Today, what a gift is our Chris! He is a delight to be with – still a handful, and needing to be watched closely in public, but so much more mature. Now, I sometimes catch him looking at me with a smile. That warms my heart. He makes happy noises, and thinks there is nothing better in the world than to be out in the car, with the radio blasting. He is not worrying about yesterday, or the economy, or the wars, or the fact that he will never drive a car, or get married. He is in the moment, and truly teaches us how to enjoy what is at hand. A walk through the mall? What else could you ask for in life!

The events of Holy Week, especially the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, call us to do more than remember. Our response has got to be more than debating the theological merits of the bodily resurrection or the physical vs. metaphysical dimensions of Jesus' resurrection appearances. The pivotal moment for Christians is now. We, too, face the empty tomb in this present moment. We, too, must decide how we will respond.

Jesus' disciples did not "get it" right away. A lot of them just went home or back to their work. They got on with life, but there was a pivotal moment when the implications of the resurrection--of the living Christ presence and the deep truth of "God with us"--finally sank in. They were changed and they changed the world.

Resurrection is not a fact of history just to be remembered and celebrated before leaving church and going home to Easter brunch. We, too, are confronted by the empty tomb and asked to choose how we will respond. Out of the ashes of death we, too, face the challenge of the possibilities for new life that surround us. Will we see them? Will we pursue them? Will we embrace them? There is a pivotal moment and we must choose to *get it* There is a moment when we must commit to act on behalf of what we value.

We value our families, our significant relationships, our close friends. We act to support each other in grief. We act to confront and challenge each other when we see destructive behaviors. We act to love each other honestly in everything. We value the Church. Many of us especially value Crossroads church: this community of faith, this circle of trust in the Spirit. We choose to give this body, this organization, our very best effort, our most creative energy, and our most honest commitment of money, prayer, and presence.

We value the dawning light of God in this world, the transformation of the "kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ." (Rev. 11: 15) Our faith tradition challenges us again and again to do the work of justice, peacemaking, and inclusion in this world. Theologian Walter Brueggemann has told us that justice is "discerning what belongs to whom and returning it to them." Peacemaking is seeking true security by assuring that everyone has freedom from the terror of violence and has access to the opportunities and blessings of society. Inclusion is the realization that we are all within the life of God. No one is left out and we each reflect the nature of God most clearly by being fully ourselves, by being most honestly who and what we are.

We stand now in a moment of choice. That moment is now in part because today is Easter. We we celebrate and remember Jesus and the new life of resurrection. The moment is now in part because the world in which we live is crying out for leaders with courage, compassion, and a vision of God's *Shalom*. The moment is now because we are listening now. We are listening and the living God is calling us to step up and step out—to find ourselves, embrace our full humanity, and come to know resurrection life for ourselves.

We can respond to the empty tomb by turning to each other and to a broken, hurting, and miraculously beautiful humanity and share with them and find in them the presence of the living Christ. Christ is risen and call us to step up, step out, and walk through the valley of the shadow of death and so to experience our own rebirth.

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

But thanks be to God,

Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:55,57)

Hallelujah!