

Luke 24:1-12

One of my favorite true stories took place around 1930. The communist leader Bukharin journeyed to Kiev to address a huge assembly on atheism. For a solid hour he shot down Christianity, hurling every argument and ridicule. At last he finished and viewed what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of those men's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded. A solitary man arose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and the audience was silent as the man surveyed the crowd. Finally, he shouted, "CHRIST IS RISEN!" And without any prompting the vast assembly's response came crashing like the sound of an avalanche, "CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED!"

We gather together today as an assembly of believers to affirm once again this ageless statement of Christian faith: CHRIST IS RISEN! (point to audience) CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED! (Repeat)

This ancient greeting is based on the gospel accounts of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. The story includes Jesus' anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane where He was arrested and then taken to be crucified by the Roman authorities. He was quickly buried in a borrowed tomb before the Jewish Sabbath began. Three days later some women arrived to care for the body ceremonially. Amazingly, they found the stone covering the entrance to the tomb already moved aside. Upon entering, they discovered the grave cloths but the body was gone. Suddenly, two angels appeared and said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen!" Luke says they were frightened. I don't think that quite captures it. I think it's probably more accurate to say they were scared stiff!

The tomb was empty and the explanation was incredulous. According to Luke, most of the disciples thought it was nonsense and wouldn't even go see for themselves, probably for fear of being arrested. Which means their fear was stronger than their faith. Nothing had changed.

However, impulsive Peter "got up and ran to the tomb... then he went home, wondering what had happened." The angels were gone, but don't you sometimes wonder if Peter's name, which means "rock" in Greek, refers to his head. He could look at something straight on, and not get it.

To be honest, one reason the disciples doubted the message was because the messengers were women. Remember this took place in a male-dominated society where a woman's witness was not taken seriously, especially concerning something as incredible as the Resurrection.

So the Resurrection story was one of those good news/bad news stories. The good news was the tomb was empty; the bad news was no one believed the women's eyewitness account. The other gospels also record the risen Jesus appeared first to a woman, Mary. I love God's irony in choosing the women to "scoop" the story. From the time of Jesus' arrest, women were the faithful ones. The men had fled in fear.

Today we call the celebration of the good news, Easter. Christmas may get more press, but Easter is the main event for Christianity. The world doesn't quite know what to do with it. They couldn't even pick a fixed date. In case you didn't know, Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, which was obviously the work of a committee.

There's a certain irony, too, that this good news celebration falls just after "tax day" this year. Which reminds me of the businessman who on his deathbed told his friend he wanted to be cremated. When asked what he wanted done with his ashes, he replied, "Just put them in an envelope, mail them to the IRS and write on the envelope, 'Now you have everything!'"

Oddly enough, that's the same message we got from Jesus when he died on the cross. In essence, he said, "My death takes care of the sin problem once and for all. You can now have forgiveness, new life, and a personal relationship with the God who loves you. 'Now you have everything!'" The assurance of that gift came with the women's eyewitness news story, and the controversy over the report has never ended.

From the beginning, the Christian Church has taught two central and intertwined truths about Easter: the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances of Jesus to his followers. In the first century philosophers and religious leaders had more problems with the empty tomb than the Resurrection appearances. Because of pagan influences they could believe in a spirit world where spirit forces could appear. It was more of an "immortality of the human spirit." But an empty tomb meant something happened to that body and some Force greater than the human spirit was at work. That was too much to believe then, and for some it still is.

Years ago a workman for the great chemist, Michael Faraday, accidentally knocked a silver cup into a solution of acid. The acid promptly dissolved it. The workman was upset, but the chemist came in and put a chemical into the jar of acid. Shortly, all the silver was precipitated to the bottom. The shapeless mass was lifted out and sent to the silversmith and the cup was restored to its original shape. If a human can restore a thing like this, why should we doubt the God who created life could also re-create it?

Of course the authorities and religious leaders could easily have refuted the empty tomb by simply producing the body, but they couldn't. They accused the disciples of stealing the body, but that was impossible because of the guards and sealed stone! Besides, all the disciples but John died a martyr's death and other followers were either killed or persecuted. A few people will die for a cause they believe in, but seldom will anyone die for what they KNOW to be a lie.

But the early Christians didn't believe just because of the empty tomb; they believed because they had seen and interacted with the living Christ after the Resurrection.

People today still struggle with the empty tomb and the Resurrection. The December '99 issue of *Life* magazine presented an historical summary of the first 2000 years of Christianity. It portrayed Jesus and the Christian church relatively favorably and accurately, but they never mentioned the empty tomb or the Resurrection, without which there would have been no Christianity.

Then there is the group called "Atheists for Jesus." They believe in Jesus the man and his moral teachings, but not in His immortality or teachings about God, let alone His claim to be the Son of God. However, if His claims are untrue, that makes Him a liar and a lunatic--not a very credible moral teacher, but they don't consider that.

So why are the empty tomb and the Resurrection so important to Christians? Because Easter is not about morality or the indomitable human spirit. Easter is about the power of God. The empty tomb and the Resurrection appearances validated Jesus' profoundly radical message of God's acceptance, forgiveness, and promise of eternal

life. That's why Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "If Christ is not raised from the dead then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain." (I Cor. 15:14)

Believing Jesus lived and died, that's "history." Atheists believe that.

Believing He died for you and me personally and lives again to bring us into the eternal presence of God, that's what we call "salvation."

So, each of us must decide for ourselves what we think of the women's "eyewitness news" of the empty tomb and Resurrection.

If you were writing the account today, how would it read? A clue might be found in how you punctuate the phrase, "Christ is risen."

If it's followed with a comma, it indicates the news makes you pause, but that's it. You just go on to other news and activities of the day.

If you write the phrase followed by a period, perhaps that indicates you consider it old news. The empty tomb is an empty ritual and you heard it last Easter.

If it's followed by a question mark, perhaps that indicates there's still doubt in your mind about it. It all seems too incredible to be taken seriously. It's nice folklore.

However, if anyone here has been through your own Gethsemane anguish during this past year, or see it in your future, your writing may be very different.

If you have suffered an illness that brought you close to death or endured the heart-wrenching pain of losing a loved one, then assurance of life beyond the grave is foremost on your mind.

If you have known the deep heartache of personal loss, betrayal, or rejection, then hope for some good to redeem the situation is what you hear in that phrase.

If you have made some wrong choices and now feel the deep regret of guilt or shame, then the promise you want to claim is God's forgiving and accepting grace that comes with that new life.

If you look ahead and feel the stabbing pangs of fear of the unknown, then the courage and peace that comes from the closeness of a personal, caring God is the promised gift you are here to receive.

If you've had any "Black Friday" experience and need the assurance "Sunday's coming," then you will punctuate "Christ is risen" with an exclamation point!

For you the greeting is a passionate prayer of praise for the assurance that a living God is in control and has power over all things, even life and death. Easter cards and Easter services are no longer superficial sentiments. They are a source of much needed encouragement.

That's what little Annie wanted to express when she decided to make an Easter card for her mother. Inside her card she drew three balloons big enough to write a message. Inside the first balloon, she wrote, "Happy Easter." Inside the second balloon she wrote, "Christ is Risen!" But she was unable to think of a third greeting. Suddenly, Annie grabbed her colored pencil and quickly wrote a message in the third balloon. It simply said, "That's All Folks!"

If "Christ is risen" then the empty tomb is filled with hope. What else do any of us need to know to have a Happy Easter? That's all folks!!

CHRIST IS RISEN! (Point to audience) CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED! (Repeat)

AMEN.