

What Happened on Easter?

Luke 24:1-12 (NIV)

¹ 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. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ 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? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ” ⁸ Then they remembered his words. ⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² 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.

Do you believe that Jesus died and came back to life? What do you make of the women’s story that we heard in our gospel reading? If you had been there with the women, would that have convinced you that Jesus had risen from the dead or would you have gone seeking alternate explanations, a way to debunk their testimony? Would you have hypothesized that it was a hoax, that someone had removed the body? I mean, Jesus did have a lot of enemies. Who knows what vile thing they planned and carried out to do to his body. Maybe other disciples stole it, to mess with the other followers, some kind of really distasteful April Fool’s prank. Who knows what really happened?

I have to admit that I don’t know if you do or don’t believe that this Easter morning story actually took place, that you believe Jesus really, actually died, and really, actually rose from the dead. Judging by the fact, though, that you are in a church on Easter Sunday morning, I assume that you give at least some credence to this idea that something extraordinary happened to this Jesus and it’s important for you to know. You came to church today wanting to hear the story again, wanting to hear it for yourself. You came wanting to know what happened that morning.

You have basically three reactions to the news that Jesus rose from the dead. First, we encounter the women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others. They got up early on Sunday morning. There was still probably some sniffing, some holding back of tears as they prepared the spices for Jesus. The image of his body on the cross was still fresh in their minds. He was more than just a good friend, more than just a loved one; he was their Messiah, their God. The Pharisees, Jesus’ enemies, they shouted for his crucifixion. In keeping with their Sabbath laws, Jesus’ burial was rushed. The women had not had time to properly mourn him or pay their last respects. They would do that now since the Sabbath, the day of rest, was over. They would anoint his lifeless body with spices to honor him.

When the women arrived at Jesus’ tomb, it was a shocking, bewildering sight. The tomb had been opened, the stone rolled away. They put down the spices and entered. There was no body. What’s going on? Has someone stolen the body? Did someone desecrate Jesus’ tomb? Who would do such a thing? Wasn’t it enough that his enemies had him hung on a cross? How much more low could someone get? Maybe it wasn’t enemies. Could someone else have done this? The women were at a loss as to what actually happened that morning.

“While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.” (verse 4) The women knew these to be holy beings, angels. They buried their faces in the ground, bowing to them. The two men, the two angels, said, “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.’ ” (verses 5-7)

The women remembered Jesus’ words. This is what Jesus said would happen. He told us that he would be betrayed. He would hang on a tree. He would be crucified. On the third day he would be raised to life! That’s where he is! He’s not here; he has risen from the dead! This morning when they got up, they expected to find Jesus’ body rotting in the tomb, in need of their spices and balms. But once they remembered Jesus’ words as the angels told them to, it all changed. Jesus is alive! That’s what has happened this morning!

Next, we have Jesus' close disciples – the eleven, as Judas had tragically already hung himself. The women go and find the Eleven. They can't contain the news. They tell them about the tomb, the stone rolled away, the angels, what Jesus himself had said. But the disciples just shook their heads. The women's words were nonsense to them. They couldn't make heads or tails of this story. It would be nice – scratch that – it would be great if Jesus rose from the dead, but Jesus was the only one could do that. He died. How can he come back to life? There was a guard of soldiers watching the tomb. They wouldn't have let Jesus' body be stolen. Where were the soldiers at? Who rolled that stone away? Who were those men in bright, gleaming clothing? Even as they wondered what happened that morning, "they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." (verse 11)

But one of the disciples couldn't sit around and simply dismiss the women's news. "Peter 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." (verse 12) Having seen it with his own eyes, recalling what the women had said, Peter knew that something amazing had happened. This was a miracle!

What do you make of the evidence presented? Had there been nothing except an empty tomb, certainly there would be questions, but that's all. God didn't leave his disciples to guess at what had happened. He sent those two angels to make it explicitly clear. "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." (verses 5-6) Jesus had told them in advance. The angels reminded them. The message was clear. Jesus has actually risen from the dead. All the other evidence fits with that message. Jesus is alive!

You are right to have come here today thinking that there's something to this resurrection of Jesus. There's something about this that affects you personally. There may be things about God and how he operates that you don't understand. There may be promises that you have heard, but you haven't seen them play out in your life and you wonder if God is really there. There are other promises that you may have forgotten, just as on that first Easter Sunday the women did not remember Jesus' words that he would rise from the dead on the third day. They came to that tomb expecting Jesus to be dead. Then the angels reminded them of what Jesus said. It was so clear! This is what he said he would do. This is what was supposed to happen. This is what Jesus planned on happening. He told us in advance so that we wouldn't have to sit here and try to figure it all out. He prompted us to believe this miracle, just like Peter did when he rushed off to the tomb and found what the women found. The evidence fits the story. God told us this would happen. It must be true! Jesus has risen from the dead!

If you have any more doubt, remember what happened next as we heard from our second lesson from 1 Corinthians 15: Jesus appeared, alive and well, to person after person, proving what he said. Every other religious leader has died and was buried. None of them got up and left their tombs. They returned to dust. They stayed dead, but not Jesus. Jesus rose from the dead! God made good on his Word. Jesus really did rise from the dead on Easter morning.

Since Jesus lives, we can take our stand on this fact. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...By this gospel you are saved" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 2) We can put all our eggs into this one basket, into this person, into these facts, and we will not be disappointed. We can believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that means that I am saved! My sins have been paid for. When my time comes, when I am about to die, because Jesus rose from the dead, I know that he will raise me as well. He will bring me to himself in heaven. On the Last Day, Judgment Day, he will raise my body. He will perfect it. Because Jesus rose from the dead, I know that the time is coming when I will have all my tears wiped away. I will never again experience a body that is failing, that can't do all the things that I used to be able to do. Never again will I be sad or have to mourn losing people. Every tear will be wiped from my eyes. I will live forever because my Jesus lives!

What happened on Easter? God made good on his Word. He did what no one else has ever done or could ever do. He raised himself back to life. We take my stand on this statement. Because of what happened on Easter, our sins are forgiven. We will live forever in heaven. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.