

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 24:1-12

*"He Is Risen!"*

"He is not here. He has risen!" Seven words – five in Luke's Greek Gospel – short, emphatic, literally *"Not here is he, but raised!"* Words nobody believed at first, but words that would change the lives of everyone who heard them.

The women, who had come from Galilee with Jesus, followed their cultural roles; they waited until the Sabbath was over, and came early to the tomb to add strong spices to the body of Jesus – not so much to honor him as to disguise the decay of death. But he had been honored in his burial: even though he was executed as a criminal, his body had been placed in the tomb of a rich man.

But now the women are confronted with something none of them had dreamed of. It was as though we had come to a funeral parlor with flowers for a wake, and found an open casket empty. Where was Jesus' body? What in the world had happened? Luke says "they wondered;" it was probably more like "panicked!" An then two angelic messengers appear, striking fear as such appearances do, and speak the strange words: *"Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen! Remember how he told you?"*

Shock, disbelief, confusion, fear – all the emotions that accompany death, but here in the face of an empty tomb and a missing body. Some accounts say the women ran from the scene, bewildered. Perhaps they began to remember Jesus' predictions about dying and rising, but no-one had taken them in. At this point, nobody believed. And of course the men too played out their culture-

bound roles: they were cynical and dismissive of the story, women's words could not be trusted, all this was "nonsense." Culture said women were unreliable witnesses; "disqualified," said Josephus, "by their giddiness and impetuosity."

Worse yet, the woman with the most to say was Mary Magdalene, from whom it was said "the Lord had cast out seven devils." Whatever *that* meant, she had to be the least plausible of them all – a crazy woman! Centuries later a Roman critic would say Christianity was "based on the story of a hysterical woman!"

It would take time, thought, investigation, and surprising encounters with Jesus, before anyone believed that he had risen. These people were not credulous fools. But there was no getting away from it – he *was* alive, he walked and talked and ate and drank, and showed people his wounds. Over six weeks or more, he was seen by hundreds of people, many of whom still swore to it decades later. And he explained over and over to his astonished friends what he had told them earlier about dying and rising, and how the idea of a Suffering Messiah was plain in the Hebrew Bible. In him, God's great rescue act in the world had come to its climax; the long exile of Israel – and of all the world – was now at an end; the kingdom of God had entered history; sins were forgiven; a new metaphorically "resurrected life" could be lived now; and the promise of real bodily resurrection still lay ahead – Jesus' own body showed how that would "work."

And so the lives of a small group of people – about 100 or so initially, but soon many more – were changed for ever. Changed in what way? First, they discovered a deep *conviction*, an irrefutable experience, a convincing story, which gave them a new foundation for their lives. Confusion melted away, and they saw how Jesus' life, death and rising - and their lives - fitted into the picture of God's work in the world. And they were more than ready to testify to what they had seen and heard, and to the difference it had made to them. They now saw the world and their lives in a new light.

Secondly, they found themselves bound together in a new *community*. Together they found support, reinforcement of their belief, a new desire for and a new practice of worship, an ethic of caring that became legendary, a community whose ethics stood in sharp contrast to paganism and Judaism. In a short time the Christian communities became distinctive, admired, and steadily attracted newcomers.

Thirdly, they found that they had a *message* to proclaim. Their story was not a private community idea, this was "God's good news" for other people – in principle for all other people! What they had learned and experienced was too good to keep to themselves. They had found new freedom, new hope, new communal life, which made them enthusiastic "evangelists" – tellers of "the good news" to others. They took it wherever they went, and were soon setting out explicitly to broadcast the news – "mission," they came to call it.

Fourth, they discovered a new identity, a new security, a new sense of *purpose*. It was strong enough to carry them through opposition, societal and family pressure, need, famine, persecution, even martyrdom. They were now utterly convinced that their lives were in God's hands, and that he was working his good purpose out in them, and through them in the world.

A story, a community, a message, an identity. All these slowly became realities to

people who heard, or were later told, "He is risen!" Because mysteriously, even in generations and places far from the original events, people began to experience that Jesus' risen presence was among them too – that they also knew that he was alive! And so it has been ever since. In every generation, people who have heard the words, read the story, entered the community, embraced the ethics, have found that there is a strange but unmistakable presence and power in their midst. Christ is alive! And it makes a difference to know that.

But we, of course, live not only on this side of the New Testament accounts, which we have heard over and over until they are dimmed by over-familiarity; we also live on this side of Enlightenment skepticism, of "historical criticism," of a general loss of belief in God. We live in the shadow of David Hume: "*No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous.*"

So the Easter story becomes one of "the kind of stories they used to tell in those days." It has a certain historical interest, but it is no more believable than the story of the Easter Bunny. And in any case, "So what?" We like a good story, but we are mostly unmoved, unchanged. We are too skeptical, too ironic in our approach, too wary of people with authoritative texts and claims to "know the truth" to be "taken in."

This story is hard to believe. And anyway, what difference would it make? Well, let's rehearse again the experience of the first Christian generation: they found a story, a community, a message, a security, that they had never known and did not know they were missing. It's still true. When we struggle to make sense of life, to figure out what it's for and where it's going; to live through its ups and downs - personally and in relationships and in careers and in health and in money and in the nation and the world... who would not want a story, a community, a message, a security that is real? It's like discovering civil rights, or

environmentalism, or animal rights, or the defense of human life, or some other great cause that is worth devoting your life to.

It still works today – Christian faith brings you into a place where the world looks different, where it no longer surprises or disappoints you; a place where your own life looks different, where your purposes look different, where your relationships weigh differently, where your life and death have a different significance. C. S. Lewis wrote that he knew the sun had risen not because he could see it, but because by its light he could see everything else clearly. It happened to me; it's still happening to me now, year by year. In some ways I feel as though I am only just beginning; that I have so much more to learn about life and death and the world and everything *from God's perspective*. And I certainly still have a long way to go in internalizing the ethics of the Christian community. But I am here to say "*Christianity works.*"

And for pragmatic Americans, "what works" is often all that counts! Dare I suggest more – that it might just be *true* as well? Be a historian: investigate, find out! Be a Peter, run to the tomb, look inside, go away and think about it. Somewhere, the New Testament says, Peter met the risen Jesus. We don't get a description of it; the meeting by the lake in Galilee sounds like it's weeks later. I suspect it might have been a bit like Edmund meeting Aslan after his deliverance in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* – it's a quiet and private meeting, but Edmund (and Peter) are never the same again.

What would convince us? And what difference would it make? See if you can discover Jesus yourself. He *is* risen! He is not among the dead; he is here, among us, the living.

Let us pray...