

The Only Thing That Needs to Be Said

Luke 23:55-24:12

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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Retired Methodist bishop Will Willimon was for many years the chaplain of that fine university in Durham, North Carolina, from which Sonny Kern and I both earned degrees—which, by the way is once again in the Elite Eight tonight at 5:00. Willimon had long been recognized as one of America's best preachers when one Easter Sunday he asked one of his regulars as she was leaving Duke Chapel how she felt about his sermon. "It was fine," she said, "but I have to confess that the sermon is rarely the main thing for me at Easter." "Oh," the preacher asked, "what *is* the main thing for you at Easter?" The woman replied, "I always find music a bit more to the point of Easter. Easter is not something to be reasoned out or argued. It's something to be experienced, enjoyed, wondered at. Therefore on Easter the music seems more to the point."

The preacher on Easter Sunday doesn't need to say much. He's a bit like the minister at a wedding, aware for once that he's not the focus of attention. After the grand entrance, the familiar but stirring music, the minister announces, "Dear friends, we are gathered here to unit Groom X and Bride Y in holy matrimony." Everybody already knows why we're gathered here. They've already gone to a great deal of trouble to get here and are as excited as they can be, but somebody has to be the one to announce the reason for the party.

Friends, the reason for *this* party is that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead! We are not here to celebrate the coming of spring or a reunion with family or a general feeling that all's right with the world. We are here because into our everyday human reality with all its attempts to deny death and avoid death but marching inexorably toward the grave, something new and incomprehensible has broken in. God has raised Jesus, the one whom we crucified, not granting him a temporary reprieve but raising him forever to the right hand of God to be Lord of all, winning for all time the decisive victory over death.

The women who make their way to the tomb on Sunday morning—and in all four gospels it *is* women—hardly know what to make of the fact that the tomb is empty. Luke says that they were perplexed, as we might be if we went to the Island Cemetery two days after a burial and found the body removed. Perplexed, or maybe more like apoplectic. "Who could have *done* such a thing? After all they've done to poor Jesus, how could they do *this* to him?" Just then two men in shining clothes appeared to them—like the men who appeared alongside Jesus in the Transfiguration, but these women had not seen that. Who are they? Angels, maybe, but it could be any messenger from the other side, from the post-resurrection world where bodies are transformed.

The women are not thrilled to see these two men. They are terrified. It is an experience of the holy. They don't know anything to do but to bow down with their faces to ground as if humbling themselves before royalty who had the power to destroy them. But the men said, "Why are you looking for someone who is alive here in the place of the dead. Jesus is not here. He has risen!" By that point the women must have looked up at the shining messengers and looked at each other with wonder: He's alive? That gave a completely different meaning to the empty burial place.

Then the shining men said, “Remember when he told you back in Galilee”—you and the other disciples, because clearly these women were disciples too—“that it was necessary for him to be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” The women thought to themselves, “Oh, yeah, I *do* remember when he said that. Where had I filed that away? I thought it was some kind of parable or riddle. Or maybe that he was talking about the end times when the Son of Man returned. Or I just put it the nonsense file.” But now they understood that Jesus meant it literally, and that although he was most certainly dead on Friday when they placed his body in that tomb, he was now alive.

But when the women told all of this to the other disciples, no one believed them. Would you? Like the song used recently in Hyundai commercials, it was “unbelievable.” Our translation says that the others, presumably men, thought it was “an idle tale.” The translators are being kind. The Greek word is *leros*, the root of our word “delirious.” They thought the women were *crazy*.

You know, all four gospels agree that the resurrection was hard to believe. No one went to empty tomb and said, “Woo hoo! Just as I hoped!” No one looked at the linen lying there and shouted, “Hallelujah!” Every person who saw the empty tomb said something more like “What the heck?”

It wasn’t that the Jews didn’t believe in the *idea* of resurrection. They expected to be raised on the last day to be judged and given a restored body in the kingdom of God. But they expected it to happen all at once, not on a case by case basis. And if Jesus had really been resurrected, it meant the last days had really come. It meant the age of Messiah’s kingdom had begun. It meant that the old way of thinking about the connection between life and death was no longer adequate. It changes everything. As the preacher Anna Carter Florence once said, “If the dead don’t stay dead, what can you count on?”

The resurrection is disorienting. It makes the world look strange. It makes us unsure anymore that our lives begin at point A and end at point B. We may not *like* the old rules of sin and death, but at least they were reliable. Now it feels like everything is coming loose.

Flannery O’Connor was a Catholic writer in Georgia in the 60’s. In her first novel, *Wise Blood*, the central character is a young man named Haze Motes who is sick of the hypocrisy of religion. (Of course the name Motes suggests a certain parable of Jesus about our own eyes, and the name Haze suggests what he sees through.) He decides to found a new church called The Church of Christ Without Christ, which is what most people actually want. They are OK with church, but they don’t really want Jesus messing with them. Haze says, “I’m a member and preacher to that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way.” That is the reality in which most people live, but the resurrection tells us that there is another reality.

In O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” she tells of a mass murderer named The Misfit who has a conversation with a grandmother he is about to have shot. She invokes the name of Jesus. The Misfit says, “Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead...and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure in life but meanness” [*The Complete Stories*, 1972, p. 132]. That puts the choice about as starkly as possible.

Lutheran preaching professor David Lose says, “Resurrection...throws off the balance, upsets the apple cart, and generally turns our neat and orderly lives totally out of whack. Which

is why I think that if you don't find resurrection at least a little hard to believe, you probably aren't taking it very seriously" [italics his, from www.workingpreacher.org for 3-31-13].

If Jesus rose from the dead on one particular Sunday morning from a specific tomb outside Jerusalem, then we *all* ought to be disoriented. The world is clearly not what we have learned to expect. The world where everything ends in death, where decay is the other name for history, does not have room in it for resurrection. As Paul says, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, the jig is up and faith is fraud, and we might as well raise hell. But in fact, he says, Jesus *was* raised from the dead by the power of his Father God, and that means that we too shall be raised and the kingdom of God has really begun. The renewal of the image of God and the renewal of the whole creation have begun. If it ever hits us that this is not a fairy tale tied to a holiday but a real event, we will be disoriented for a while but then reoriented to a new world.

The resurrection is not a symbol of something else. It is not a symbol of new life or hope or faith. So a preacher on Easter cannot say anything but that Christ is risen. He cannot give a painlessly relevant sermon on how the resurrection of Jesus teaches us never to give up or how good wins out in the end. The resurrection of Jesus does not teach us about anything else. It teaches us that Jesus rose from the dead, which means that he is who he said he was, and that death has no power over him. It means that Jesus was right about everything the religio-political complex said he was wrong about: not just his identity, but forgiveness and nonviolence and care for the poor and the inwardness of religion and the coming of the kingdom of God. That Jesus rose means that eternal life has already broken into this old dying world and that Christ is making everything new. It may seem crazy at first. It may be disorienting. But if we believe it, the life of Jesus infects our old dying lives and makes us new. Thanks be to God!