

YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER

Luke 24:1-9

(some language and ideas borrowed from Paul Smith,
Jesus: Meet Him Again for the First Time)

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The resurrection is the grace of God. In the grace of Easter, we learn both how to deal with death and how to live life.

Fred Craddock tells the story:

A colleague of mine down at Phillips University, a young woman, taught physical education. She was a marvelous person, young, vigorous, and married. One night she was sitting in her apartment grading papers, and she heard a knock at the door. She went to the door, unlocked it, opened it, and there stood death, with his yellow face staring right at her. She slammed the door, locked it, and called the doctor. He said “Malignant.” She had surgery. A few months later she was back, and I said, “Hey, you’re looking good.” She said, “I never felt better.” Now, she had lost some weight, but she was back teaching physical education, bouncing on trampolines and all, doing great. Everything seemed to be wonderful.

She was at home one night watching television when she heard a knock at the door. She went to the door, opened it, and there he stood with his yellow face. She slammed it and locked it and called the doctor. He said, “Chemotherapy.” Oh, she was sick. All her hair came out, so she got a wig and she came back to school. I said, “That’s becoming. You should have been wearing that all along.” She said, “I feel pretty good.” And she was teaching again.

One night she was sitting there grading papers in her room and she heard a knock, so she went to the door, unlocked it, and there he stood, old death with his yellow face. She slammed the door and tried to lock it, but the lock was broken. She called her friends and relatives. Everybody gathered, and we took turns leaning against that door. We leaned against the door; we leaned against the door. We even got to where we were joking and laughing, “We’re not going to let him in. We’ll keep him out.” We’d look out the window, and there he sat under a tree, with his yellow face right out there.

One night she said, “Get away from the door.”

“What?”

“Get away from the door.” So we got away from the door, and he came in, and I felt sorry for him. He likes to come in with his fiery darts of pain and fear. (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 38)

Death likes to rob us of those who are most dear to our hearts.

There is, perhaps, no more wrenching word that can be said than “dead.” In fact, I’m amazed at all the euphemisms we have concocted in order not to have to say someone is dead. Sometimes we say they have fallen asleep, expired, we lost them, they left, passed away, didn’t make it. We’ll say almost anything to avoid the four-letter word – perhaps the worst four-letter word in the English vocabulary. Dead. D-E-A-D.

We hate the word because death is a thief, a horrid thief. It robs us of the tender touch of someone we love dearly. It robs us from sharing a smile with our daughter. Feeling the warmth of our husband or wife. Enjoying the security of our parents. There are lost embraces, conversations that never get to be exchanged.

Dead. It’s an awful word. And it robbed a group of disciples of their Savior, their Lord.

They were stunned. How could it have happened? They knew that following Jesus was a risk. There had been some close calls before. Unwelcome political uprisings were often brutally put down. But this man had walked on water. There were witnesses. The lame had walked. The blind had received sight. A great following had developed around Him. The city was abuzz a week earlier, celebrating Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as if He were some sort of king.

The disciples could still hear the proclamation echoing in their ears, resonating in their heart. “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest.” With a loud voice, they were praising God for all the miracles they had seen worked by His hands.

“Stop the blasphemy. Your disciples can’t speak of you as the Messiah,” the Pharisees protested.

“I tell you,” said Jesus, “if my disciples are silent, the very stones will cry out.”

The week had started so wonderfully. How could they have ever anticipated or predicted such a dreadful ending, such a horrible death?

Now look at Him. The one who had entered as a king was hanging on that awful cross. His back was shredded from the flogging. His face was beaten from the fists. His brow was lacerated by the thorns. The nerves and ligaments in his wrists and feet were torn by rough spikes. As if to write “The End” at the conclusion of a story, they had seen the soldier step up with a spear and rupture Jesus’ internal organs, with a butcherous stab.

They were empty. Death leaves us so empty. So angry. So shocked. It never really makes sense – sometimes, no sense at all. The disciples were stunned to silence by the death.

And we, too, are left in the deep despair that death delivers. So many of you have been robbed by death this year or in recent years. For you this morning, the story about death his real. You don’t have to sit here and imagine what the disciples felt like when the one whom they had loved the very most, and the one that loved them the most, was suddenly and surprisingly snatched away.

You know the emptiness, the loneliness, the despair that accompanies the enemy of death. As they hurt, you hurt.

I'm happy to say that the story of Jesus does not end with the cross. The conclusion is not at the tomb. The storm that occurred during the crucifixion had ended, and the blackness turned to the light of day. The earth ceased its seizures. All was still.

After the three bodies had hung motionless for some time, two men and their servants approached the cross upon which Jesus was hanging. They spoke to the centurion, showed him their official papers, and removed Jesus' body from the cross, using huge iron pinchers and bracing themselves against the base of the cross to remove the long iron spike from Jesus' feet. Next, they lowered the cross bar to the ground, with Jesus' slowly stiffening body still attached. It was gruesome work – prying the other two spikes out of the crossbar and finally extracting them from Jesus' wrists. But eventually the work was done.

These two members of the Jewish ruling council, who had shown some sympathy for Jesus, quickly wrapped Jesus' body in a clean linen cloth and carried the body away. Joseph of Arimathea had Jesus' body brought to his own tomb – a tomb never used before, a tomb hewn out of a rocky hillside in a garden plot he owned nearby.

The women, Mary of Magdala and another Mary, the mother of James, and others, watched as the men hurried in and out of the tomb, tearing long strips of cloth in which to wrap the body for burial, as was the custom. It had to be done in haste, since the Sabbath was approaching, and no work could take place on the Sabbath. The women decided that after the Sabbath had passed they would come back themselves and make sure the body was properly anointed with all the customary spices.

Now the body lay, mummy-like, on a stone shelf along the wall. With the Sabbath approaching, there was not a moment to spare. The men pushed and levered the great stone into place over the mouth of the tomb and headed back to the city, followed by the women.

It was supposed to be a holiday, a festival, a time for the Passover Sabbath with friends and family. Some holiday. Nobody was in the mood for celebrating. Shock. Disbelief. Stunned. Trying to figure out how it all went wrong. When it went wrong. What they might have done differently. A week that started with "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" had ended with the chant, "Crucify Him. Crucify Him."

Pilate placed a contingent of Roman soldiers to guard the tomb, to make sure no one would tamper with the tomb.

The Sabbath passed without any incident. And just before sunrise on the first day of the week, the women gathered up their spices and slipped out of the house where they had been staying. The city gates would open at dawn, and they hoped they could get to the tomb, add their spices, and be away before anyone came along asking questions. Jesus' mother, Mary, had been physically and emotionally exhausted by the devastating event of watching her son crucified. Finally, finally Mary slept.

John watched the women's silhouettes as they disappeared up the street. He reflected for a moment on the therapeutic value of having something to do when you are overwhelmed by grief. He was glad Jesus had asked him to care for His mother.

As they approached the little garden outside the wall of Jerusalem, to their great surprise and dismay, they saw that the tomb stood open. It was empty. Even as they were pondering their perplexity, two men stood near them in dazzling apparel. Just as the angels had proclaimed the glad tidings of Jesus' nativity, so now, again, God sent some of these celestial beings to bring to the women the tidings that He had risen from the dead. As in every case in scripture when mere humans find themselves standing in the presence of heavenly messengers, the ladies are terrified and bow their heads in respect and reverence.

The angels tell the ladies, "You should have known better." That is the essence of what they said. They asked, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Why are you looking for a living person in a graveyard? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that He must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." And they remembered His words.

It's a gentle rebuke. "You should have known better. Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" Surely they should have known that He who is life would never have remained imprisoned by the bonds of death. Jesus had repeatedly warned His disciples that He was going to die, but to take heart. He was going to live again.

Yes, those ladies should have known better. They should not have been seeking the living Lord in a graveyard.

We should know better, too. We should know that death cannot defeat those who follow the Lord of the resurrection. For as Paul said, even as Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection, those who believe in Him shall follow. Put another way, because Jesus Christ has been victorious over death, those who believe in Him will be victorious, too.

Death has been defeated. Death that comes to your home, death that visits your family and robs you of the living love relationship that you have, is ultimately, absolutely powerless. As Paul declares, death is swallowed up in victory. "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

Death has been defeated in Christ.

The divine creatures give the greatest proclamation of the ages. "He is not here. He has risen!"

When they declare that Jesus has risen from the dead, they declare that we can be a people of hope and not despair.

When they declare that Jesus has risen from the dead, they declare that those who love Him don't have to be afraid anymore, for ultimately nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus – not even death, itself.

When they declare that He is risen from the dead, He is not here, they are saying, “Grieve if you must when those that you love die, but do not grieve without hope.”

For Jesus Christ, Himself, the one who was resurrected, the Son of God, will come down from heaven with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first, and then we who remain until the coming of the Lord shall be caught up together with them in the clouds and, thus, we shall always be with the Lord.

What they were saying is this: You'll be forever in the Kingdom of God, side by side with your loved ones who also profess the Lordship of Christ. When they said “He is not here. He is risen!” they might as well have said, “Sleep well tonight, ladies. Your Lord is living. He's in control. God is on His throne. There is nothing at all to bring you despair.”

One of my good friends was in another city. I would say that this friend is a “student of people.” When he meets someone (he has strong people skills), he strikes up a conversation with ease, and before you know it, he is interviewing you, trying to learn life lessons from your story. He's truly interested in you and who you are and wonders if there's any proverbial wisdom to be picked up from your experiences. He struck up just one of those casual conversations, talking to a young lady whose husband was an engineer; she was a CFO for a large national retail entity. As the conversation continued, he learned that she was the oldest of eight children; she herself had two children, about ages 12 & 9. Finally, he brought the conversation around to spiritual matters and asked her, “Where do you go to church?” “Oh,” she said somewhat sheepishly, “I don't go to church. I grew up in a church where it was heavy.” She'd been fed a large dose of fear-based theology, and, whether the wounds were her fault or the church's fault, they were there. She just avoided “the church thing” with her own children. Oddly enough, however, this family just experienced the death of her mother-in-law, the grandmother of her children, and she had to explain death to her own children. By now in the conversation, my friend had made her comfortable enough where she had a moment of honesty. “I just really wasn't sure what to say.” Oh, I'm sure she could remember the words to repeat about the story of Jesus and the empty tomb of Easter, but somehow, through the wounds and the distance from the community of the Living Lord, she had lost the answer and didn't know “really what to say.” How do you comfort your children when their grandmother has died, and you have no words that ultimately give hope?

Folks, when you find yourself away from the church, the community of those who die with Christ and rise with Christ, when you find yourself distant from the only people who can face death with courage and confidence, you don't know what to say. For in losing the church, you've lost the only answer to the only question that matters... “What happens next?” For those who follow the Living Lord, we say, “Oh, Death, where is your sting? Oh, Death, where is your victory?”

Jesus said in John 11:25, “I am the resurrection and the life, and he who believes shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Do you believe in this?

