

# Defeating Death With Life

Luke 24:1-12

April 8, 2007 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

---

Regardless of the circumstances that lead to it, death always leaves a gaping wound. In my interactions with grieving families I've tried to figure out who has it worse: those who lose someone suddenly and have no time to prepare for it, or those who lose someone after a long struggle. The trade off is that while they do have time to prepare, they are also forced to begin living with death before it comes. From what I can tell I am not sure it really makes that much of a difference. Whether death comes suddenly or slowly, we are never ready for it. There is always that one more thing we wish we'd had time for – the trip we never got around to taking, the conversation we never had, that one last embrace we wanted to share. Death robs us of these things.

You get a sense of that even in the story of the resurrection. Luke tells us that on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb with spices. It had all happened so fast on Friday that they didn't even have time to give Jesus a proper burial. Like the phone call that comes in the middle of the night, the One they loved had been ripped from them. The fact that Jesus had been telling everybody it would happen this way did nothing to soften the blow. There simply is no way they could have prepared themselves for the pain of losing him. And so now, all they could do was go to the grave and anoint the body. Death had taken all other options away from them.

Until we somehow allow ourselves to feel the sting and the emptiness of death, we will never be able to hear the Easter story in all its fullness. I remember reading somewhere that the great Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney was once asked by a group of seminary students to talk to them about eternal life. He said he wouldn't do it. "You're all too young and healthy to appreciate it," he told them. "Come back to me when you are old, when your joints hurt every time you move and you have to take medication just to keep breathing and you come face to face with your mortality every day. Then you'll be ready to understand why eternal life matters."

Marney's words point us in the right direction. Easter can only matter to us if we first come face to face with the stark reality of death. Easter can only be good news if it is a response to something that otherwise would be bad news. There are lots of vague spiritual notions out there about some kind of vague life beyond the grave – the immortality of the soul, the divine

# Defeating Death With Life

Luke 24:1-12

April 8, 2007 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

---

spark that lives with in, the desire to keep people alive in our hearts and all that pagan nonsense. None of that has anything to do with what the Bible says happened at Easter. The story of Easter is about people who are utterly, incomprehensibly surprised to find life where there isn't supposed to be anything but death. On Easter some women went to a tomb carrying spices. Their Lord had been torn away from them by the brutal reality of death, and as they tread along the path to that cemetery what they expected to find, what they should have found, what all the evidence dictated they would find was a dead body. Death had come, and there wasn't a thing they could do about it.

Easter isn't about the inevitability of Jesus' immortal soul escaping the body so that he might live on in some kind of ethereal state. It is about the fact that Jesus had succumbed to the horror of death. Jesus was dead in a tomb for three days. Jesus had gone the way of all flesh. He had died.

And then God raised him back to life.

In an Easter essay he wrote 12 years ago, Darrell Jodock points out the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is essentially the belief that the course we are on will eventually lead us to a good outcome. The odds may be stacked against us now, but optimism says there is evidence in the present situation to suggest that if we just keep at it long enough things will work out OK.

But hope is different. Hope believes that things will work out OK not because there is something in the present situation to suggest so, but rather because there is some power or some force that will come to us from outside the situation. That is why hope can be born in the midst of the most desperate circumstances, because hope believes that the circumstances themselves do not have the final word.

Easter isn't about optimism. Easter doesn't tell us to just keep our chins up and keep on smiling because things really aren't that bad after all. I don't think the women who went to the tomb carrying spices were optimistic about much of anything, except for maybe thinking they might be able to find someone to roll the stone away from the tomb to grant them access to the dead body of their Lord.

# Defeating Death With Life

Luke 24:1-12

April 8, 2007 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

---

Easter isn't about optimism. It is about hope. It is about the belief that there is something, someOne who comes to us from outside our desperate circumstances to bring about an end that we could have never produced. It is about the fact that when the women got to the tomb they found that the stone had already been rolled away. Something had happened before they got there to change the trajectory they were on. Something was happening to push them in a direction that just moments before they didn't even know existed. Easter is about the hope that after we have done everything that possibly can be done, God still has something else to do.

Lots of people have pointed out over the years that nobody actually witnessed the resurrection take place. We have no records that anybody actually saw the stone roll away from the tomb; nobody actually saw Jesus emerge from it in the flesh. All we have are accounts of what happened after that took place.

That has raised all kinds of questions. Why would God not make such a miraculous event more obvious to everybody? If CNN could have had a camera there to record the event live that would have resolved a lot of doubts over the years. And yet there is at least one reason why that didn't happen that sort of makes sense. In order for people to have seen what happened at that tomb they would have had to be watching that tomb with constant vigil. But why would you do that? Nobody puts a news camera in a graveyard because there is absolutely no reason to expect that anything will happen there worth recording. When you seal a grave that is that.

Unless Easter happens, that is. On Easter, God acts to reverse the inevitable. On Easter God confronts the inevitable reality of death with the reality of life, and a new future is opened up – a new future for the women who came carrying spices, a new future for the disciples who were completely bewildered by what the women told them. A new future for us, if we are willing to claim this story as the story of our lives.

That is why the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead is more than a historical question for scholars to debate. It is more than just a private spiritual experience for some people to experience. The resurrection of Jesus is the fundamental fact with which all humanity must come to terms. If God really did call dead Jesus back from the grave, then that means that everything we thought we understood about life and death will have to be reinterpreted. It means

# Defeating Death With Life

Luke 24:1-12

April 8, 2007 – Easter Sunday

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

---

there is a power at work among us that we hadn't counted on, a presence in our midst that is busy doing things we hadn't predicted. It means that God is opening up new possibilities of life where previously death was the only option.

According to the Apostle Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was but the first fruits. In other words, what God did to Jesus was the first and ultimate sign of what God desires and intends to do for all His people. That is why the resurrection is more than just a historical event. It is the shape of a life we are called to live in the present. If Jesus really is alive then that means that we are called to confront death in all its forms with the reality of His life. We are called not to be optimistic people, but hopeful people, people who have seen that there really is another Presence at work in this world who does the unexpected. Every time the powers that be try to tell us that this is just the way the world is, so settle in and get used to it, the resurrection calls us to say, "No, this isn't the way it has to be." God has a new future to open up before us." We don't have to accept this world in its sorry state. We are freed to believe and to act differently – freed to love, freed to take risks, freed to sacrifice, freed to live with joy and hopefulness. If death has the final word, such things make little sense. But if the life of Jesus Christ really does trump death, then such things are the only things that make sense.

Luke never tells us this, but I am betting that somewhere in this story there is a shattered urn lying on the ground with burial spices spilling out of the cracks. I am betting that in their haste to run back and tell the disciples what had happened those women tossed that thing aside like an umbrella on a sunny day. Whatever the case, they didn't those spices anymore. Death had been defeated. There was a Life to get on with living.

Thanks be to God. Amen.