

The Day Death Died

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning and happy Easter.

I am Will and this is my mom, Vaughn. We are part of the Rockbridge Community Group. Today's scripture is a reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24, verses 1 through 6, 10 and 11, 13 through 34, printed in the liturgy.

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went out to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men, and closely gleamed like lightning, stood beside them. 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?

[1 : 0 8] He is not here. He has risen. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them, who told this to the apostles.

But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Now that same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.

They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along beside them. But they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, What are you discussing together as you walk along? They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?

What things? He asked. About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him.

[2 : 1 0] But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us.

They went to the tomb early this morning, but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said.

But they did not see Jesus. He said to them, How foolish you are and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther.

But they urged him strongly, Stay with us, for it is nearly evening. The day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them.

[3 : 13] Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven and those with them assembled together and saying, It is true, the Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Thank you, Will and Vaughn.

Happy Easter, Christ Church. So good to be with you today. You know, it's become custom this time of year to do a passion play.

And there was, many years ago I heard about a passion play production, the first part of which was a resounding success. The actors delivered their lines with eloquence and feeling.

[4 : 20] They brought tears to the eyes of the audience when they were rendering Jesus' last days, the anguish in the garden, the upper room, and the betrayal and the trial and all these scenes.

And then it came for that climactic crucifixion scene when Jesus was dramatically hoisted up on the cross. And that scene unfolded.

It came to the end and Jesus there on the cross, he cried out in a loud voice, It is finished! And then he bowed his head and he breathed his last. And time went on and for some reason the Roman soldiers offstage were distracted.

They missed their cue and didn't come out on stage. So after a while Jesus, who had died, he kind of turned his head like this and peaked. And he noticed that they missed their cue.

So he raised his voice again and cried out even louder, It is finished! And then he bowed his head and breathed his last again. And finally the Roman soldiers, they got their cue and in their rush to get out on stage, they didn't grab the collapsible swords and spears, they grabbed real ones instead.

[5 : 32] And so one of the Roman soldiers came out and thrust the spear in Jesus' side. And he cried out in a loud voice, Oh God, I've been stabbed! And most of the audience was thinking, Okay, this is kind of an artistic twist on the Passion Play.

The more biblically literate folks there knew that Jesus in fact had never said that because he was in fact dead at that time. And the stage manager knew something had gone terribly wrong, so brought the curtain down and behind the curtain they took the bleeding Jesus off the cross and rushed him off to the emergency room.

And the cast huddled up together and they decided the play must go on to the glory of God. And so they brought out Understudy Jesus.

And Understudy Jesus did a fantastic job with the resurrection scenes and it came time for the final scene where Jesus ascends into heaven. And the crew had rigged up this Peter Pan weight system.

And the goal was to gently lift Jesus heavenward and it would be this really striking and dramatic, powerful image of him going up into heaven.

[6 : 44] The problem is they had never rehearsed this particular scene with Understudy Jesus who was considerably lighter in weight than his predecessor. So it came time for Jesus to raise his hands and bless the disciples and promise them the Holy Spirit.

And then the harness launched Jesus off the stage, just launched him up. And with a shriek, he went up and kind of bounced around in the rafters up there.

And a bruised and battered Jesus was slowly lowered back down to the stage. And for the second time that night, they took him off and sent him away to the emergency room.

And I say that because, you know, we come to Easter. Many people come to church on Easter. They're looking for the real Jesus. They're looking for the authentic, original, historical Jesus.

But so many of us have gotten versions of Jesus that are far too human. We don't know if it's a comedy. We don't know if it's a tragedy. It's a fairy tale. We're not sure what to make of all this.

[7 : 46] And the one thing we know is the version of Jesus we have probably needs to go to the emergency room and get some surgery. You know, as we come with our own questions today, we come, I think, wondering, you know, whether or not Jesus actually was raised from the dead.

We wonder what it might mean to take seriously the fact that he is the resurrected son of God. And if he is that, then what does that mean for our ordinary, everyday lives?

So that's what we're looking at today and next week as we explore Luke 24, these resurrection appearances of Jesus. And our story today tells us that we know the risen Christ through spectators and Scripture and sharing.

That's the gist of our story today, that we know the risen Christ through spectators, Scripture, and sharing. And so I want to talk first of all about how we know the risen Christ through spectators.

Many people say the resurrection never happened. It's this wonderful symbol, this mythic fable in which good triumphs over evil and life continues in the face of death.

[8 : 59] And as dark as things get, there's always the dawn. No matter how bad it is, we can live in faith. That's the message, right? But surely we can't believe that Jesus was literally, physically, historically risen from the dead, never to die again.

But the gospel writers say, yes, in fact, that's what we believe because that's what happened. And they go to remarkable lengths to show that this is not a legend. It's not a vision, a myth, a nice story that never happened.

And they say that it's a once, one-off, shocking historical event that no one was expecting. And I want to just point out a few features that are important to consider if you wonder whether or not the New Testament is historically reliable.

First of all, Luke is a historian. And Luke writes his history on the basis of oral testimonies. And so you notice in verse 18, it says that one of the two that was walking along the road, he was named Cleopas.

Why does Luke tell us his name? The two of them are walking along. Only one of them gets a name. If this is a fictional story, then you would expect for both of the characters to have a name or neither of them to have a name.

[10 : 12] So why do we get only one name? I'll refer you to another passage. It's John 18, the Gospel of John. It says, Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear.

And in parentheses, the servant's name was Malchus. Well, why do we care? Who's Malchus? How about Mark chapter 15? Andrew mentioned this on Good Friday. Why are the writers including these random names for us?

Well, they don't do it without a purpose. You know, modern readers, we do all of our fact checking through footnotes, right? That's how we verify an author's claims. We go to their sources of authority.

We see if what's being written is true or not true. But in the ancient world, they didn't use footnotes. Instead, they gave the names of living eyewitnesses whose testimony was the basis of the account.

And this is an oral culture. These are people who can retell their account with incredible accuracy from memory. And so the Gospel writers are saying, Look, if you don't believe us, go and talk to Cleopas.

[11 : 32] Go talk to Malchus. Go ask Simon and Rufus and Alexander. They'll tell you what they saw. Because they're still living when Luke wrote his Gospel.

So Luke's writing history. If this were a fictional story, he would have never included the witness of these women. You know, fortunately we live in a time where a woman's testimony is trusted in a court of law.

But that was not the case in the first century. And yet, who were the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection in all four of our Gospels? We read in verse 1, It was on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, that the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.

And they were not thinking to themselves, I can't wait to witness a resurrection today. You know, Easter brunch later on is going to be fantastic. They went thinking, who's going to roll the stone away?

They went with these spices to embalm a corpse. They did not go to sing the Hallelujah Chorus. But we're told in verse 5 that they're there and they got this message from these heavenly messengers that say, why do you look for the living among the dead?

[12 : 40] He is not here. He has risen. And they took that message and it says in verse 10, It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the others with them who told this to the apostles.

If you're making up the story, nothing could undermine your credibility more than the witness of these women because the bias at the time did not consider them a reliable source of information.

The only reason you would write the story this way is that the facts forced you to. This was in fact how it happened. We talk a lot in our day about centering the voices of women, the stories of women, which is a wonderful thing, but we talk about that as if it's a new idea.

You know who came up with that idea? It was the Christian movement. It came out of the movement of Jesus himself. So Luke is piling up for us all kind of evidence for us to consider.

The empty tomb, the appearances of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples, these eyewitness testimonies of named sources, Mary, Joanna, Salome, Susanna, Cleopas, Peter, John, Thomas, through all four gospels.

[13 : 54] These spectators are saying to us what was said inside of the empty tomb of Jesus. Jesus, why would you look for the living among the dead? He's not here.

He is risen. This is the day that death died and Jesus won a victory over death and he is now alive. He got up in the darkness of the night and now he's loose out there in the world.

And I know that that seems for some of us like a silly fantasy. And if that's you, you're not alone because that's how it sounded to the apostles themselves. In verse 11, they did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

But these men and these women, they would go out and they would encounter the risen Jesus and they would be so deeply transformed by their experience of the living one that they found themselves no longer dead but alive.

Alive spiritually, alive morally, alive to the hope that they too would one day be risen from the dead. And that is our hope. If Jesus is alive, then we too can have his life and have it forever.

[15 : 09] And that's how we know the risen Christ. We know the risen Christ through spectators. Spectators who were there. Saw with their own eyes. We know the risen Christ not only through spectators but also through Scripture.

We know the risen Christ through Scripture. I want to fast forward to the end of the story in verse 32. And it says that these two that were walking along this road together, they asked each other, were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?

These were two depressed disciples who were dragging their feet as they walked along because their friend Jesus had been executed on Friday. Passover came to an end and now they're headed home.

And as they're walking, a stranger who's not shy joins them in the conversation and says, what's the latest? What's up? What's going on? And they're amazed.

They're amazed at the cluelessness of this person who has no idea about the news that everybody's talking about. And so they begin to tell this stranger all about Jesus. Jesus was a man full of power in his teaching and in his touch.

[16 : 26] Everybody wanted to hear him. Everybody wanted to be healed by him. Jesus had authority, the authority of God himself in his words and in his deeds. And they say in verse 21, Cleopas says, we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.

We thought he would be our deliverer. We thought he would come to liberate us and to bring about a new exodus, but he was crucified. And our friends told us about all this strange stuff this morning when they visited his tomb and there was no body and there was some idea that maybe Jesus was alive.

But that's crazy because we all know that the dead stay dead. I mean, it sounds good, but who could take that seriously? And so they're sad. They're sad because death has the last word.

Death means that there is no redemption in this broken, fallen, sinful world in which we live. Can you imagine telling this story to Jesus?

Telling Jesus all that he needs to know about Jesus? Well, what happens next is extraordinary. He, verse 25, he, Jesus, said to them, how foolish you are and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken.

[17 : 47] Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

Jesus doesn't say, hey, guys, look at me. He says, hey, let me unpack for you the truest truths of the universe. And Jesus gives the most amazing crash course for how to read the Bible.

He exposit the word of God. He interprets the Old Testament to them, which is, if you try to do, you know is quite difficult. Because these are people who knew their Bible extremely well.

But what Jesus does is he gives them a golden key to unlock its deepest meaning. He gives them new lenses through which to read with fresh eyes.

And he says in verse, it says in 27, it says, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. When you interpret the Bible, know that it points to and it centers upon a suffering Messiah.

[18 : 54] And that his crucifixion is not the devastation of your hope. It is, in fact, its climax in fulfillment. And Jesus begins to go through the historical precedents, the prophetic promises, the psalmist prayers.

And he shows this constant theme and pattern that they had not seen until now. That Israel's sufferings increased in Egypt to the screaming point.

And then redemption came. That Israel cried to the Lord in her suffering. And then God raised up judges to deliver.

That the pagans, the Assyrians, they swept through Israel and had their way. But then they were routed by the Lord himself. Jesus says it's always suffering and then glory.

And you've got to have eyes to see that. Jesus began, I'm sure, to walk them through all the promises that God had made to Abraham. And they got expanded under Moses and got even larger under David.

[19 : 56] And where God says, I will bring my saving purposes for this world to birth through a suffering yet vindicated Israel. And then through a remnant of Israel.

And then through one who would embody all of Israel. And walking through the prophets, Jesus told them about the suffering servant of God's servant people. He told them all about the Son of Man who would carry Israel and the world through intense suffering.

To emerge on the other side of exile. On the other side of human alienation with sins forgiven. And a covenant renewed. And a kingdom finally established.

The risen Jesus comes along to people like you and me. And he says, let me interpret the scriptures for you. Because for them, a crucified Messiah is an oxymoron, is it not?

It's a complete contradiction in terms. You might as well talk about fried ice. Or a square circle. Or dark light. Jesus says, let me interpret for you the divine necessity of suffering for the forgiveness of sins and the justifying of sinners.

[21 : 10] And I imagine in this conversation, Jesus took Cleopas' puzzled statement. And he gave it a slightest twist to turn it into a joyful statement of Christian faith.

Cleopas said, they crucified him. But we had hoped that he would redeem Israel. And I'm sure Jesus said, yeah, they crucified him.

And that was how he did redeem Israel. And through Israel, all the world. Jesus, I'm sure, took them through one of the most beloved texts that talks about suffering, then glory.

It's Isaiah 53. And I hope it's one that we know well at Christ Church. It says this, that he, the suffering servant, was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him. And by his wounds, we are healed.

[22 : 07] And then it says, after he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. And then by his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many.

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How does the living Christ speak to his church even today? Does he, like the politicians and the advertisers, short circuit and bypass our mind to go straight to our heart and there to stir up all of our feelings and pull on our heartstrings and manipulate all of our emotions?

No. Jesus gets to our hearts through our heads. And it's the experience of the burning heart that comes through the scriptures, properly opened to our open minds, properly interpreted, explained, and applied in the way that Jesus taught his truth to his apostles those next 40 days after the resurrection, before his ascension, which they wrote down for us in the New Testament.

Their interpretation is the Lord himself's interpretation. Friends, genuine resurrection faith. Authentic Easter faith.

[23 : 39] Issues in this burning heart. Entrance inside of us, a heart that's fired up by the spirit of God, teaching us the word of God, hearts that are thrilled by the exposition of the scriptures to our minds.

if Jesus is alive and we have his presence the Bible is no longer just an interesting book for us it is the megaphone through which the living Lord powerfully speaks to us today if you're here today and you want your heart set ablaze by the presence and the power of the risen Christ read your Bible it's one of the first things that the risen Christ did when he stepped out of his tomb to begin the new creation was to open the scriptures to teach his disciples then shouldn't this be one of the first things that we do when we step out of bed to begin a new day if the living Jesus taught the scriptures not just to one individual disciple but the two disciples journeying together shouldn't it be our high priority to open the scriptures with other people who want to know the truth if you don't have the habit of daily Bible reading I want to encourage you to start tomorrow in the Psalms start with a chapter of the Gospels you can start with our epistles for everyone reading plan start somewhere because that's where the living Christ speaks to us and if you're not journeying together with other people around an open scripture in the presence of Christ I want to encourage you email me email Andrew we'll help you find someone to do that with and when we open the scriptures we should pray for Jesus presence and his guidance and be prepared for him to rebuke our foolish and faithless readings in order to have a fresh and listen to a fresh interpretation from him because it's only with him at our side that our minds can catch fire that our hearts can begin to burn and where Christ himself can lead us to that point where faith will become sight and we'll one day see him face to face this is how we know the risen

Christ through spectators and through scriptures and finally through sharing we know the risen Christ through sharing and I'll end with this what does the what is the genuine experience of the risen Christ achieve well it leads to a witnessing proclaiming gospel telling church all the stories of Luke 24 the people get up to go and to tell others that they've discovered and experienced the risen and living Christ will read it so well a minute ago it says in verse 33 they got up and returned at once to Jerusalem and there they found the eleven and those with them assembled together and saying it is true the Lord has risen they didn't even finish their meal they just got up and started running in the dark at great risk to themselves why because they just had to tell others and they were met with the other disciples who had to share their news they couldn't contain their joy either everybody was a skeptic but their doubts were overturned and they came to a conviction that the Lord he's risen if he's risen then we're forgiven if he's risen then the world's going to be recreated if he's risen then all will be put right their burning hearts began to set the church on fire their burning hearts would go out and set the world on fire

Jesus ends the gospel with the empty tomb and Jesus appearances to his disciples but we're going to get into the second volume that he wrote the sequel called the Acts of the Apostles where he talks about the permanently changed lives of these skeptics turned messengers they had been total failures they had completely abandoned and denied Jesus constantly failing him and letting him down at every turn but but because of the resurrection because of the risen Christ they had within themselves now a new life an irrepressible joy an unshakable faith that turned them from cowards into courageous men and women that went out and shared the good news with their friends with their friends with their friends neighbors and coworkers they didn't just stop there they went they took the gospel all the way west to Italy all the way east to India they took the gospel south to Ethiopia they took the gospel north to the peoples of Eurasia why because they couldn't contain the joy of the resurrection they just had to share it with other people and how did they do it they simply followed the model of Jesus they went out and they began to come alongside people like these two on the road to Emmaus walking sorrowfully along the path of life sad and dismayed at the total failure of human hopes living under death's long and dark shadow they went out and found people people who'd experienced tragedy and misfortune and loss people who'd been let down by God people who were desolate and crushed and alone and like Jesus they offered companionship and they began to walk beside them as friends on the journey and they helped them over time to discover in the scripture their lay keys keys that unlock the central mysteries of reality keys that enable us to discover the truth for ourselves and somewhere in that process every time people would begin to experience and realize the presence and power of the living Christ himself and their hearts would be warmed by the truth of his sacrificial self-giving love that's the experience of innumerable people who become Christians from the first century to the 21st century and maybe you have a story like that maybe a man or a woman came alongside you in the sadness of your journey and their hearts were burning within them and they had come to have open eyes to the scriptures open eyes to God in Christ and their feet had become energized to go out and at risk to themselves to tell the good news to you why because we share what we most love and we commend what we most cherish and we cannot keep our greatest joy to ourselves

Christ Church Jesus is risen from the dead he has launched the new creation in which all is forgiven all is recreated all is reborn so let us join him in this project let us become resurrection people people of joy people of life for this world still and death people for the world that Jesus loves so much he gave his life let us celebrate today and not just today but this year let's celebrate God's victory over death and let us commit ourselves even now to Jesus' mission to giving life to this world in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen you so let's judge and take part