

The Living Among The Dead

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[0 : 0 0] Over the past few weeks, we've worked mostly on the story from Luke 23, characters that you meet there, and the people who surrounded or encountered Christ during the time of his trial and death on the cross.

And this 24th chapter then deals with the resurrection of Christ. And it's a very simple story.

Dick Lucas points out that Luke, who wrote Acts, says that Christ appeared for 40 days among the disciples.

But when he gives the account of it in his gospel, there's only one day that he talks about, and that's this first day. The beginning of the week when the passage opens, as you'll see it.

I realized when I finished last week that the passage I handed out I never got around to talking about. I don't know if any of you went home scratching your heads about that. But I almost got through it, but time ran out.

[1 : 1 5] So I'll perhaps get back to it again. But this is the text that we're working on today from Luke 24, and it's the first 11 verses, and it's the first of the three stories of the resurrection appearances of Christ on the first day of the week.

And the whole Christian community, whether it's Orthodox, Catholic, Reformed, Independent, or whatever it is, is based primarily on the fact of the resurrection, that on the third day he rose again.

And it's interesting, while the creeds always talk about the third day, this passage talks about the first day of the week. And I think that they came to understand it, and we since have come to understand it, in terms of almost Genesis.

And you know the seven-day creation. Well, this is the first day of the new creation, a totally new creation, which is severed from, different from, categorically different from the creation.

This is the new creation, which begins with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And so that's the point at which Luke starts when he talks about it.

[2 : 4 5] And you will know, you will be thoroughly familiar with the fact that the resurrection is an offense to the sensibilities of many people.

Many people see a whole lot of good in Christianity, apart from a belief in the resurrection. And many people see valuable teaching, and many people are prepared to say, to believe in the resurrection is enough, that it happened doesn't matter.

And so you get all sorts of people trying to rationalize this unique event, which took place, so that they can fit it into the kind of framework of their thinking.

They've been to school, they've been to university, they've been out in the world, they've read books, they've experienced various things. So you create, in a sense, a field of force where your mind works, and you can, within that, you can put certain facts.

But when you're confronted with the resurrection, it simply doesn't fit. It doesn't fit into anything that you've ever experienced, and it's there.

[4 : 02] And what Luke has to do is to tell you about the fact of the resurrection. And I think that he has written, not just as a reporter telling you what happened that day, he has very much written it with you in mind.

Because, you see, the Christian church got past the point when they could say, they could call on this person, or this person, or that person over there to stand up and say, I was there, and I know it happened.

But you see, as time went on, those people became fewer and fewer. And yet the importance of the resurrection still remained a kind of foundation stone to the whole of Christian faith.

And so, the writers of the gospel, and in this case Luke, had to establish some basis on which you, a 20th century man, in the real world, and I question that very much, that concept, but I'm not going into that today, but that you would encounter in a way which would leave you utterly convinced of the fact of the resurrection.

That's what Luke had to do. That was his job. And he chose these three very simple stories, which we're going to go over on the next three or four weeks, to explain to you the fact of the resurrection.

[5 : 37] The resurrection, in a sense, is somewhat anticlimactic to the death of Christ.

The central reality of Christ, the incarnation, is the death of Christ. But it's the resurrection that forces you to look at what did this man teach?

Why did they crucify him? What was the significance of his death? And the resurrection forces people to look at all that and say, well, that can only ultimately be understood in the light of his resurrection from the dead.

Lots of people try and fit Christ into the whole pattern of human religious experience and say, within the realm of that experience, which most of us at some point in our life have touched within that realm.

There are all sorts of things about Christianity which we can fit in, but the fact of the resurrection doesn't fit in.

[6 : 50] It offends our sensibility. We can't do it. I was talking to Bill on the way down about these fusion experiments.

Now, some people believe that it happened and some people believe that it didn't happen, but obviously the test is can it be repeated? And who is going to repeat it and write it up in such a way that our world will be convinced that a great new source of power is available to us through nuclear fusion?

It's got to be repeated. This event cannot be repeated. It is a singular event in the whole of history.

Now, on the front page of the province this morning, there's a picture of a man on a stretcher who got hit by 12,000 volts of electricity yesterday and got blown off a rooftop and fell three stories.

When you look inside, the picture, which is that big, the story is about that big. And it was just an event that took place. And you could probably go to the hospital and have that event verified for you by talking to the man to whom it happened.

[8 : 09] And you can talk to the man who was in the house who heard him cry for help. And you can talk to him. And so, in a sense, you can verify that event which took place yesterday.

Next week, it will be harder to verify. A month from now, it will be even harder. And five years from now, it will be hard to find any record that it had taken place if you don't know who the man is who got blown off the rooftop so that the whole thing will fade.

Now, the resurrection is that kind of an historic event. It's parallel in that it happened on a particular day in a particular place at a particular time in history.

And so, to get back and recreate the event is a very difficult thing to do. You have to peel off so many layers of time and language and culture and processes of transmission to try and get back to the event.

So, the uniqueness of what you have in the 24th chapter of Luke is that he, I think, with profound inspiration from God puts in front of us three stories.

[9 : 27] And the purpose of those three stories are to show you how the resurrection took place and to convince you of the truth of it.

So, you've got to read the stories very carefully. If you look at it and you see certain things like two men stood by them in dazzling apparel, that isn't helpful to read that.

Who were they? Why did their apparel dazzle them? Why were they in the story in the first place? It suddenly moves from the realm of reality into certain how do you deal with two men in dazzling apparel?

How do you deal with the fact when they went there first thing in the morning they found the stone rolled away? Hard to know how that happened.

And so, with those kind of events surrounding this particular historic happening, you suddenly think, well, maybe it's in the realm of something which is nice to believe whether it's true or not.

[10 : 44] But I don't think that was Luke's purpose. Luke's purpose was to tell you that it was true, that this took place. And Paul wants to tell you and to assure you, and I think it must remain true to the testimony of the New Testament, that if this event didn't take place, then we are deluded about the Christian faith.

if there wasn't a day and a time and a place where this event took place, well, how can you reach out for yourself and touch that event?

And Luke gives you these three stories to help you do it. Archbishop William Temple said, and I found this very helpful, that there is no way we can use human philosophy or human reason or human logic to approach the fact of the resurrection and say that it fits.

He says, the only way you can accommodate this fact is if you start from the fact that it happened. The whole of the Christian, the whole of Christian theology is based on the fact that on this first day of the week, when these women went to the tomb, the tomb was empty.

Now you know that the stories of swooning and he came to, the possibility that he, that they went to the wrong grave. All these, every possible conjecture has been brought forward.

[12 : 27] And yet, Luke told this story and this story has survived. And it survived the continual assault of human minds for 2,000 years.

And it remains this. And I am here to tell you that if you will look at this story, it is possible that you too will be convinced of the fact that this took place.

The whole story, just to give you some sort of, to give you a reference that you might be interested in called the Easter Enigma by John Wenham, which is, which is an attempt by a New Testament scholar to put together the whole story from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to put together all the conflicting events and all the different viewpoints of the four writers of the gospel.

And he, and he's written this book called the Easter Enigma to put it all together. So I don't want you to go away saying, well, you haven't answered this question. I know I haven't answered most of the questions, but those questions have been answered.

And if you're really interested, answers are available. So what I want you to look at is this, that I remember two lawyers who came to faith that I knew personally as friends.

[13 : 50] One of them was a law student at Queen's University. and he wrote, he read an article in the Queen's Journal that convinced him that there must be a God.

Now you may not, if you know university newspapers, you know that that's probably a unique effect that anybody, by reading one of them, would ever come to any such conclusion as that.

But he, it was a special issue came out and an article was written in there and he went away from reading that convinced that God existed. But he didn't know who God was.

And in the course of a confirmation class he was confronted with the Creed of St. Athanasius. Now I don't know how many of you are familiar with the Creed of St.

Athanasius and I'm not sure that if you were familiar you'd want to know any more about it. but it's the one that Dorothy Sayers said, you know, paraphrased by saying, the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Holy Spirit incomprehensible, the whole thing incomprehensible.

[15 : 01] Well, that's the pattern of the Creed of St. Athanasius, the way it is written. But he, with his legal mind, at least in training, worked through it and came to the conclusion that the God who created the world, came into the world from the person of Jesus Christ.

He lived and died and rose again. That was the conclusion he came to. Now, I don't think that he could go out, I mean, he could try that in a court of law to convince others and that's basically how New Testament truth, I think, is communicated.

You are the jury, the facts are presented to you and you have to come through with a verdict. And your verdict is based on, the encounter with the person who claims to be the one who lived, died, and rose again.

And whom we encounter in the written word by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit. So you come to believe. And you come to believe not because, not in the same way that you believe that two plus two makes four, more, but in the way that you have personally encountered this man, Jesus Christ, and you come to put your faith in him.

If you look at the story carefully, you will see that it opens early in the morning, women on their way to the tomb to fulfill a certain ritual, and their intention was to go there and embalm the body.

[16 : 41] Now very often when death happens in the family, particularly if it's not expected, people phone the minister and say, what do we do? Well I want to tell you that there's very little you do.

It's all over. And apart from a few formalities, there's not very much you can do. And what's happened, of course, is that we have surrounded that event with certain rituals that we go through.

And those rituals help us, and one of the rituals involved here was the embalming of the body, and so the women went through the ritual that was concerned with the death of someone whom they had known and loved.

And those rituals are important. The Christian church has taken over, giving some direction in the conduct of those rituals, so that a lot of people think that the Christian church is primarily there to help you bury your dead.

It's not there for that purpose at all. It's there to bear witness to the fact of the resurrection. That's the function of the church. Nobody else wants to do that job particularly.

[17 : 51] Of course, in Vancouver, there are people who are taking it on in different ways, but I don't want to get into that. But essentially, we surround death with certain rituals that we go through because they're helpful to us.

That's what these women were doing. They were going through a necessary ritual. There was a practical necessity of embalming the body and the practical necessity of removing the stone.

They had nothing whatever to do with that. When they got there, the stone was gone and they were, it says, perplexed. Having been perplexed, looking into the tomb, they suddenly found themselves frightened.

And they had a reflex reaction when they saw the men in the dazzling apparel that they bowed down to the ground. Because they had that kind, that was the only way they knew to react to a totally unique situation for them.

And then they were rebuked. They weren't told things by these angelic visitors that no man had ever heard before. No secret word was whispered to them.

[19 : 09] No new revelation was given to them. Nothing was said by these angelic visitors to change the whole sum and substance of human knowledge.

Nothing like that happened at all. What the angel did was to say, remember how he told you. you're wrong to be here among the dead seeking for the living.

Why are you here? Because you know better. And so they were rebuked and reminded that he had told them while he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.

Jesus told his disciples that on numerous occasions that are recorded in the gospel. So they were told to remember what they already knew.

And I think that that's, you know, the heart of coming to grips with the Christian faith in a personal way is not that some angelic visitor is going to whisper words of enlightenment into your ears.

[20 : 28] but you are going to be asked to remember something that you already know. That it's more important for you to be reminded of what you already know than to be informed of something you don't know.

Because you are part of the creation in which God has been speaking to you in particular ways for a long time. And so you need to be reminded of what you already know.

that reality is there. And that's why I think that the way that Luke sees you coming to believe in the resurrection is not that you can explain why there were angelic visitors there, not that you can explain why the grave clothes were wrapped in a certain way, as John records, not that you can explain who rolled the stone away, none of those things, but that you, through the reading of the scriptures, come to know that the resurrection is an absolute necessity.

Nothing else could have happened. It had to happen. And you become aware that it had to happen. And as you read the scriptures, you see that this is not an event that contradicts everything that human experience knows.

It's the thing that fulfills everything that human experience has ever longed for or hoped for. And so our hopes are realized. And things that we scarcely would have the courage to believe, we find have in fact taken place because Christ has been raised from the dead.

[22 : 19] And it had to happen. And that's what really sparked the early preaching. They said, you, and they addressed the congregations in Jerusalem and said, you took this man and you crucified him and you slew him and you nailed him to a tree, but God has raised him from the dead.

And that had to happen. It wasn't possible, he said, that this man could be bound by death. Well, that's how the whole thing broke out.

And it came as a result of these women coming to the tomb and seeing it. They acted in a very ordinary way. I mean, they were there to embalm, they went there, it was their duty, they followed the sort of ritual practice that was involved in it.

When they were reminded by the angels, they went and told the eleven, eleven, and the eleven heard them and the words seemed to them an idle tale.

That's how this story ends. Profoundly human behavior at every level. So that I don't think that we are convinced by being sort of lifted up into some place of special revelation.

[23 : 44] I think this fact of the resurrection meets us where we are as we encounter the person of Christ. And I think our fear, our perplexity, our doubts, our questioning, the fact that we go to the people whom we thought would be most interested and they consider it an old wives tale, that they dismiss it.

That is the nature of the fact of the resurrection. And I don't think you move beyond that until you begin to read the testimony, to encounter the things, the testimony that Christ himself has given.

That's the only clue we're given in this whole story. Remember what he told you. When you remember that, then you will understand this. And that's how they were to come to believe in the resurrection.

And it's how we are invited to come to believe in the resurrection. Not by some form of intellectual or rational gymnastic but by remembering what we've been told.

And recognizing that the resurrection is not an erratic event in the history of the world. But it is the cornerstone on which the whole understanding of human history is based.

[25 : 00] It was impossible that he should be held by the power of death. Well, we'll go on to the next story next week. Let me just say a prayer.

Our God, the terrible simplicity with which you confront us with the fact of the resurrection, the story of a group of women who go to the tomb to embalm a body.

And they become the messengers to the whole of creation, to the whole of the world, to the full of history, of that event which had to happen, that event in which everything else needs to be seen, and that event in which everything else alone can be understood.

so bring each of us from the ordinary circumstances of our daily life to the confrontation with the person of Jesus Christ, who lived and who died and who rose again.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[26 : 27] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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