

Luke 24:1-12

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Christ is risen. Amen. Would you turn with me, if you are looking in a Bible, to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24. If you're looking in one of the Pew Bibles, it's found on page 884. We're looking at the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24, verses 1 through 12.

Luke 24, starting at verse 1. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. But when they went in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you when 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. And they remembered his words. And returning from the tomb, they told these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now, it was Mary Magdalene and

Joanna and Mary, the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb. Stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves, and he went home marveling at what had happened. Sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction. Two weeks ago, my wife and I saw the movie *Argo*. The film is about the attempted rescue of six American diplomats who were trapped in Tehran after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. November 1979, the American embassy was taken over by protesters, and all the American diplomats were taken hostage, except for six who managed to escape the building without anyone noticing them. For over two and a half months, they remained in hiding. They couldn't even leave the place where they were staying. And the film is about the attempt to rescue these diplomats and get them back to safety. And at one point, the U.S. government agents are plotting together. How will we do this? Right? They can't send in a direct military, because that would endanger all the other American hostages. They thought, well, maybe we could deliver six bikes, and they could ride 300 miles through back roads to the Turkish border. But the problem is, first of all, it's winter, and there's snow on the ground. And second, we don't even know if they're in good enough shape to do that. Well, they could have them pretend to be English teachers from the international school.

Problem, the international school closed eight months ago. Or third, they could issue them fake journalist visas. But that would endanger all the real journalists who were there. Well, finally, Tony Mendez, the CIA agent, puts forth a plan. He says, the Canadian government will issue them Canadian passports, and they will pretend to be a Hollywood movie crew, scouting out locations for a sci-fi movie. I will fly in as a Canadian film producer. I will give them their Canadian passports and their cover identities, and we will all fly out together two days later, and this is how we will rescue them from their peril. At first, everyone is skeptical. The State Department officials are skeptical. His contacts in Hollywood are skeptical. And even after they get behind him, and he gets on a plane, and he arrives at the house where they're staying, and says, I've come to get you out, their immediate reaction is, you're crazy. This is a bizarre plan. We have no experience in film.

It could cost us our lives. It could cost him his life. And yet the plan is plausible precisely because it is so strange. No one would expect such a thing. Now, as with most movies that are based on historical events, *Argo* certainly takes some liberties, and it misrepresents some things and does contain some factual inaccuracies. You can look at the Wikipedia page if you want to sort those out.

[4 : 41] But the central plot line of the movie that a CIA agent named Tony Mendez went in and did this, strange as it may sound, is true. And if the movie wasn't based on historical events, I wonder if it might not have won Best Picture. Sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction.

Now, we just read a very strange story from the Gospel of Luke, the Easter story. A group of women go to pay their respects at the tomb of their friend and former leader, who had been executed two days earlier. They find his tomb empty, his body gone, and angels proclaiming that he was raised from the dead.

This morning I want to ask two questions. First of all, is there any reason to believe that this strange story is actually true? And second, if it is true, what difference does it make?

Now, first, is this strange story true? Now, let me begin by pointing out this is not only a question that modern, enlightened, scientific people ask. When the women came to the tomb and found it empty, they did not immediately conclude, Jesus has risen from the dead. No, it says, verse 4, they were perplexed. Maybe they thought the body was removed or stolen. And then the male disciples, in verse 11, were also skeptical. They heard the women's story. Verse 11 says, these words seem to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. So, if you find it hard to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, you're not alone. Now, sometimes we think that people in the ancient world were more gullible. They would believe anything. They believed in miracles. They believed in ghosts. They believed in angels. So, they wouldn't find it hard to believe a rumor that some guy had come back to life from the dead. But that's not true at all. Even for those people, for the many people who did believe in miracles, ghosts, and angels, they knew just as well as we do that when a person dies, their body decays, and they don't return to life in this world. Now, in Jesus' time, there were various expectations about the afterlife. There were some people who completely denied it. The Jewish Sadducees, the Greek Epicureans, they said death is the end. That's it. Others, some of the more philosophical types, Plato and his followers, taught the immortality of the soul. When you die, your body decays, and your soul flies away to another world. Now, some of the Jews did believe in a bodily resurrection of all the righteous. But that would happen at the end of time when God would return and judge the world and all the righteous be raised to life. But when Jesus died and his body was laid in the tomb, no one, absolutely no one, was expecting that he would rise again. So we have to ask the question, what convinced these initially skeptical and frightened women and men that Jesus had actually been raised from the dead?

You know, the first thing they encountered was the empty tomb. Imagine if you just attended the funeral and the graveside burial of a loved one. And you saw the casket being lowered into the grave and dirt being thrown on it and the hole filled in and the stone, the gravestone put there. [8 : 29] And two days later, you went to the cemetery to pay your respects. And the stone was put to the side. There's a big empty hole in the ground where the coffin had been.

It would be traumatic. It would be shocking, disorienting. You'd think, am I really in the right place? What happened? Who could have took the body? Where is it? And if you call, I need to call somebody. And if you got that call, you'd probably say, let me come and see this myself and make sure things are exactly as you do say. Well, that was exactly Peter's response. When the women came to him and told them this story that the tomb was empty, it says he immediately ran to the tomb to see for himself. And he wasn't alone, actually. Verse 24 tells us he was accompanied by at least one other of the male disciples. And Peter found the tomb empty, just as they had said. Now, if the tomb wasn't really empty, anyone could have easily demonstrated that. Jesus was buried just outside of Jerusalem, a major city. Anyone could have gone to the tomb, produced the bones, and disproved the whole Christian movement right on the spot. And there were plenty of people who would have loved to do that. I mean, there were people who had crucified Jesus, who had executed him just a few days earlier. Surely there would have been people with a motive to disprove this claim that he had been raised from the dead. But no one ever did. And in fact, some of the early opponents of the Christian movement explicitly admitted that the tomb was empty. They said, Jesus' disciples came and stole the body. There's a reference to that in Matthew 28, 11 through 15. Now, we might ask, well, is it possible that somebody did steal the body?

Well, again, that's not only a question that we ask. Peter seems to have asked that same question. He went to the tomb to see if it was really empty, and then to see if there was any evidence that someone had stolen the body. But when he gets to the tomb, if you look in verse 12, he notices a very curious detail. It says, he looked in and saw the linen cloths, by themselves. Now, you might ask, what are the linen cloths? What does that mean? Well, when Jesus was buried, his body had been wrapped in a linen shroud. Luke 23, 53 says that. It's sort of like a big bed sheet. It was the common Jewish burial custom to wrap up a dead body and lay it in a grave. And so if someone had

stolen the body, they would have carried away the linen cloths, the wrapping, along with the body, right? You wouldn't, if you were a grave robber, you wouldn't take time to unwrap the body of a dead man who had been beaten to a pulp and crucified and certainly didn't look very good and carry a naked, bloody corpse out of the tomb.

[11 : 30] You'd get blood all over yourselves. It might, the body might even fall apart. It's horrid. You'd never do that. You'd never get away with it. And so when Peter looked in the tomb and he saw the linen cloths laying there alone, it says he marveled because he realizes the tomb is empty and the body was not stolen.

Now, of course, you might ask, well, what if the disciples stole Jesus' body and made up the whole, made up this whole story later on? Well, in that case, you have a group of powerless, fearless, fearful, grief-stricken women and men who deliberately concoct a plan in the space of only a couple of days to steal their leader's dead body, hide it where no one else found it, and then they invented a story that they all knew to be false, namely that he had rose from the dead.

And then for the rest of their lives, they suffered greatly, and many of them died for this story, a story that they had knowingly made up and not one of them ever recanted during their whole lives. Now, that's even more unlikely than six American diplomats, having been rescued from captivity by posing as a Canadian film crew to come back, renounce their American citizenship, claim that they had never had any connection to the United States in the first place, live in Canada for the rest of their lives, and work in the film industry, even though they had had no prior experience doing so. You see, throughout human history, many people have suffered and given their lives for what they believed to be true. But very rarely will anyone suffer, as much less give their life for something that they know to be false. That's why conspiracies and cover-ups only last so long before the truth comes to light, and they quickly dissolve when the conspirators are no longer getting any personal benefit from their lies. You see, the Christian belief that Jesus rose from the dead, it's not just a beautiful idea that has no historical basis. It's not just wishful thinking that might be nice for people who need a crutch to lean on. The closer you look at the historical details, the clearer it becomes, there's no other coherent explanation. If you want to look into this in more depth, get some of the resources on the book table afterwards. The disciples were convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. And 2,000 years later, looking back, we can see even more evidence than they did. So one thing, notice, who are the first witnesses of the empty tomb? It's a group of women.

Now, in the culture of Jesus' time, women were seen as inferior and untrustworthy. The male disciples thought, just an idle tale, those silly women. Don't know what they're talking about. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote, women are inferior to men in every way. And that was not an isolated view. In both Jewish and Roman law courts, the testimony of a woman was not legally valid. Most Jewish rabbis refused to even teach the law to women. One rabbi, Eliezer, said there is no wisdom in women except with the spindle. In other words, the only thing a woman is good for is making clothes. So if you were constructing a fictional story, or if you were playing fast and loose with the details, or if you wanted to gain some power and convince powerful male leaders to accept your story, you would never make up a story like this. The only way that we would have such a story is if it really happened.

[15 : 26] One final piece of evidence that I'll mention. We know that the early Christians loved to quote from the Old Testament and show how the prophecies from the Old Testament were fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. But if you read through all of Luke chapter 24, there are no direct quotations from the Old Testament. And the description of Jesus is not derived from Old Testament texts or images either.

Some of the Old Testament prophecies about the resurrection said that resurrected people would shine brightly, shine like the stars in the heavens. But when Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection, he never is described in that way. You see, the story is written as if something completely new, something completely unprecedented has happened. It's like reading the account of a prisoner, long ago condemned to life in jail. He spent the last 20 years behind bars. Every day is the same routine. But one morning, without any prior warning, the guard walks in. He unlocks the door to his cell. He leads him out. He gives him a pair of street clothes and says, you're now a free man.

And he walks outside. And he's standing outside the walls of the prison for the first time in 20 years. His head is spinning because he can hardly believe it. It feels like a dream. He's breathing fresh air.

He has no idea what he's going to do for the rest of his life. But he knows that his life will never be the same as a free man. It's like a woman who was born blind. And ever since she was born, she has never seen the light of day. And so she's learned to go about her life by feeling and touching the help of friends and guide animals and remembering how to get from one place to the next. But one day, a doctor comes to town. And through a previously unknown medical technique, he cures her of her blindness.

And she walks out of the office. And for the first time in her life, she can step outside and see the trees and see buildings and see the blue sky. And she can look into the faces of the people whom she loves so dearly and who have loved her. And this new reality of seeing and light and color is so overwhelming, she can hardly put into words what she's feeling.

[18 : 09] When the women came to the tomb and found it empty and heard the angel's words, he is not here, he is risen. When Peter went to the tomb and saw the linen cloths all by themselves, they could hardly put into words what had happened. But they knew that what had happened was so momentous that their lives would never be the same. You see, Jesus' resurrection is not only a true story.

It makes all the difference in the world. You know, seeing the movie *Argo* for me and my wife was a riveting experience for about two hours. But in the end, we got up from the couch. We said, wow, that was a pretty good movie. That was worth the \$1.28. We paid a Redbox for it.

And we went to bed. And for the next couple of days, we were perhaps inspired by the courage displayed by Ben Affleck's character in the movie. His willingness to take responsibility for a group of people at great risk to himself. You know, in the end, seeing the movie didn't change our lives. And the reason it didn't change our lives is because we haven't spent the last three months hiding out in our house, not being able to leave, with everyone else who worked at the place where we worked being held hostage. We don't need to be rescued like they did. So we can look at the rescue operation and maybe admire it from the outside and maybe be temporarily inspired by it. But it doesn't really change us on the inside. But if we believe this story that the New Testament tells, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, entered into this world and lived a life of perfect goodness and purity, and yet was put to death on a cross and then rose from the dead, we can't just admire Jesus from a distance and go on with our lives as usual. Because Jesus died and rose again in order to rescue us.

Every one of us will face death one day. And death is an ugly, horrible thing. The stench of a rotting corpse is sickening. The sight of a dead body is disturbing. Death brings an end to hopes and dreams and plans and relationships. Maybe even this morning you're grieving the loss of someone who is no longer with you on this Easter Sunday. And try as we might to avoid or postpone this reality, every one of us will one day die and our bodies will decay and turn to dust. And as our life progresses, we're increasingly confronted with reminders of death's impending and unavoidable advance. Our bodies begin to ache. Our sight grows dim. Our joints grow weak. Our memory fades. Parents grow old. Children move out. Loved ones pass on.

[21 : 43] And we look back. And know, I will never pass through that stage of life again. Now, I'm young enough that I haven't, and my life has turned out in such a way that I haven't had many close brushes with death, personally. Some of my grandparents have passed away, but my parents are still alive. My wife and children and I are generally healthy. But you know, sometimes when we're lulled into the illusion that death is a safe distance away, it slaps us in the face. With a friend diagnosed with cancer, or a freak accident, or a violent tragedy, we all live in death's dark shadow. And in one way or another, whether we think about death every single day or hardly at all, we live our daily lives.

In response to that reality. Maybe you think about death every single day. And you live with fear. In constant fear that something bad will happen to you or to your kids. And so you're always on the defensive. You try to be as secure as possible and not take risks. Because the dominant reality is the fear of death. Or maybe you've had terrible, horrible things happen to you or your family or your close friends. And so you live on the edge of despair. Dark depression. Because in the face of death and its finality, life seems utterly meaningless. Life seems like the ancient Greek mythical figure Sisyphus, who is compelled to roll a huge stone up to the top of a hill and watch it roll all the way down and have to repeat the same thing over and over and over and over forever. Or maybe your life has been relatively smooth. And so you think about death hardly at all.

But you live by the assumption that you have one life to live. And that's all. So maybe you're driven to constant action by a deep-seated anxiety. As an undergrad in college, you double major and participate in five extracurricular activities and lead three of them because you can't miss out. You only go through college once. And you better not miss out on any opportunity. Or as a grad student or a young professional, you're consumed.

By the ambition to excel and be at the top of your class and prove yourself worthy. Because if you only are mediocre, then you feel like a failure.

[24 : 53] Or as a parent, you feel compelled to do everything possible for your children, to give them the best education, the best opportunities, the best life with no hindrances. Maybe you didn't have a great childhood. Maybe you haven't had a great life. But the reality is you're living vicariously through your children. Your kids are now your life.

Now maybe you're not driven by anxiety. Maybe you just let loose. You think I'll just have as much fun as I can while I still can.

Because again, this is the one shot that I get. So you might as well enjoy it while it lasts, right? So you make a bucket list. Maybe you have enough resources to do everything on your bucket list. Hike Kilimanjaro, helicopter skiing in the Andes, ride on a camel around the Great Pyramids of Egypt. Maybe a low budget version of the bucket list for most of us. Maybe you just try to make it through the week to get to the weekend.

You live for the next game or the next vacation or the next high. Because if you're honest, that's all there is to live for. You see, whether we think about death every single day or whether we never acknowledge its reality, we live our lives in the shadow of death.

[26 : 28] And the Bible tells us that physical death, as bad as it may be, is not even our deepest problem. That it's only a symptom of an even deeper alienation.

That we're separated from God. The very author of life itself. Ever since the beginning of the human race, according to the Bible, we've rejected God's authority over us.

We've turned away from God. And sought to build our lives around other things instead. This is what the Bible calls sin. Now it takes a variety of forms.

Sometimes we're blatantly defiant. We know what we ought to do. We know what's right. And we don't do it. Perhaps more often, we're outwardly compliant.

Upstanding citizens. Faithful churchgoers. Moral examples. But we do these things in order to gain status before God and other people. We obey God because we want to get something from Him.

[27 : 30] We want Him to do something for us to make our life go well. The way we want. But if God doesn't give us what we want, or if people don't respect us like they should, then we get angry.

Or bitter. Or distant. Because we're not really living for God. We're trying to use God to get what we want. This is why Jesus saved some of His harshest words for religious people.

For religious leaders. Who thought that they were right. And yet we're so far away from God. Or sometimes we just ignore God. We think, well, as long as I treat other people right, that should be enough.

But if you're a parent, imagine if one of your children completely ignored you for a whole year. Every morning, you would get them out of bed and feed them breakfast and get them dressed and send them to school.

And you'd pick them up at the end of the day and feed them dinner and do their laundry and take them to Little League. And they interact normally with everyone else. Their school teachers, their friends, their coaches.

[28 : 43] But they never look you in the eye. They never say a word to you. They never acknowledge your presence. And yet, how often do we treat God in the same way?

Who upholds our lives from day to day. You see, in our sin, we have alienated ourselves from God. And the result of sin is death.

Not only physical death, but eternal separation from the majesty and love and glory of God. And eternal suffering in our self-centered state.

We live under the shadow of death. We live under the shadow of death. And the weight of our sin. But this is why Jesus Christ came into the world.

To rescue people like us. Who live in the shadow of death. And under the weight of sin and guilt. And Jesus came to rescue us.

[29 : 48] Not by performing some magic from a distance. But by fully identifying with us. By becoming one of us. By living a fully human life.

He took upon himself. All that was ours. So that he might give us. All that was his. When he died on the cross.

He took upon himself our death. And the guilt. Of our sin. And the punishment. That we rightfully deserved. He bore the weight. Of alienation from God.

A weight that we could never bear. Without being crushed by it. And in his resurrection. Jesus offers. All that was eternally his.

To us. His love. His life. His peace. His joy. His righteousness. And glory everlasting. If Jesus has risen from the dead.

[30 : 50] He has defeated death. Decisively. And forever. And he has thrown open the door. To life everlasting. For all who would turn.

And believe in him. And if Jesus has ridden. God is. God. God himself has declared. That Jesus death. Was a sufficient. And complete. And final.

Sacrifice. That he's paid the price. For our sin in full. So that we might be completely. Forgiven. That we might be free. To have a new start.

A new beginning. This is the invitation. To trust this Jesus. This Jesus who died. And who rose again. And to receive from him today.

Forgiveness of sins. Life everlasting. To turn from living under the shadow of death. And live the rest of our lives. In light of Jesus' resurrection.

[31 : 46] Have you put your trust. In this Jesus. Are you living in light. Of what he has done. You can begin today.

If you haven't already. The bible says. If anyone is in Christ. He or she is a new creation. The old things have passed away. And the new.

Has come. Maybe you say. I'm intrigued. But I still have questions. I'm not. Yet convinced. Well I invite you to come back next Sunday.

To hear more. Or talk with a friend. Or talk with me. Or one of the other pastors. We'd be happy. To sit down. And talk about the questions that you have.

Maybe you've been a Christian for a long time. Maybe you've heard this message. Many times before. Maybe you've. Drifted away. And your life has been focused around other things lately.

[32 : 48] I invite you this Easter Sunday. To come back. To Jesus. To center your life. On him. To be strengthened.

By your trust in him. And your resolve to live in light. Of his resurrection. You see because Jesus has risen. We can live our daily lives. Not in the shadow of death.

But in the light. Of the reality. Of his resurrection. And so instead of being controlled. By fear. And despair. Jesus fills us with hope. And courage.

When you're. Because when we're united with Jesus. In his death and resurrection. We don't fear. Death. Anymore. And because we don't fear death. We're free. To truly. Live.

Live. We have courage. To face suffering. And enter into the suffering of others. With compassion. Even at great personal cost. Because Jesus did this for us.

[33 : 44] That's what the first disciples. Demonstrated to the world. That they were willing to suffer. And even die. One of the first Christian martyrs. A guy named Justin Martyr.

In the second century. He said to the Roman emperor. He said you can kill us. But you cannot really harm us. Because Jesus' suffering. Was not in vain. He knew that his suffering.

And our suffering. For the sake of Jesus. Will not be in vain. Either. And instead of being driven by anxiety. To make a name for ourselves.

In this world. Jesus fills us. With peace. Later in the chapter. Jesus appears to his disciples. And the first thing he says to them is. Peace. Be with you.

And in John 16. 33. He says. I've told you these things. That in me you might have peace. In this world you will have troubles. But take heart. I have overcome the world.

[34 : 41] And when we're full of the peace. That Jesus gives us. We can work. And strive. Not out of insecurity and fear. But in order to love.

And serve. The people around us. Instead of living. To accomplish. To accomplish. To accomplish. Our bucket list. We live for the one. Who has rescued us.

If you've ever been rescued. From death. At great cost. To somebody else. You live the rest of your life. Differently. Followers of the risen Lord Jesus.

We have good reason. To celebrate. And to be joyful. And to be glad. And to rejoice. In all the good gifts. That God pours into our lives. Because they're only a foretaste.

They're only an appetizer. Of the banquet that is to come. When Jesus returns. A second time. In his glory. But as people who have been rescued. May we live the rest of our lives.

[35 : 43] Not for ourselves. But in light of the fact. That we have been rescued. At great cost. The apostle Paul wrote this.

Jesus Christ died for all. That those who live. Might no longer live for themselves. But for him who for their sake died. And was raised. May we live our lives.

In light of Jesus' resurrection. Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Almighty God.

In your great love. You sent Jesus Christ. Your son. To die on the cross. To rescue us from sin. And in his glorious resurrection. You delivered us from the power of death.

Grant that we may live each day. Not in the shadow of death. But in the light of his resurrection. And his promise.

[36 : 49] Amen.