

Things Are Not as They Seem

Luke 24:1-12

I remember one early summer evening with my twin brother running out into our big backyard and seeing for the first time that year the flashing of fireflies. The unmistakable florescent green flickers of their glowing bodies lit up the night sky. That dark night there must have been thousands of them flashing their lights on and off in the sky as if they were in competition with the stars above them. My brother and I ran laughing and chasing them through the darkness and grabbing them in our fist, looking in to see them glow, and then opening our hands to see our catch and watch the glow until they eventually took off again. Then when we had grown tired of grabbing them and watching them fly away, we caught them in our hands and put them in an old jelly jar which we had carefully driven a screwdriver through the top to make breathing holes. That evening we went to sleep in a dark room, lit fireflies as our lantern. We fell asleep and forgot about them.

About a day or two later I looked in that jar and noticed that they were all dead, their little bodies flickered light no more. I unscrewed the top and poured them out on the windowsill checking to see if by chance there might yet be hope. I gently poked and nothing moved. Feeling bad and guilty, I left them there.

The next evening, when it was dark, I walked into my bedroom to go to bed and there in the corner of my room was the familiar glow of a lightning bug flying around. I caught her, took her out on my porch and released her to the evening's summer breeze.

- Maybe it was never really dead.
- Maybe it was not one of those lightning bugs that we had had in our jar.
- Maybe one somehow escaped from the hole in the jar lid.
- But, it could be a miracle.

We want to believe in miracles, that life is not always only what it seems to be. We hope so much that there is, in fact, something more. Every one of us in this room hopes that the hard realities of our lives and the painful ending our loved ones face and we face, will have its new beginning. But some endings are so hard, so painful we are not sure we know how we will ever find our way beyond them.

That was the case for the disciples of Jesus. They had left their occupations and their lives, and placed their hopes in the wisdom of Jesus of Nazareth. In the last weeks of his life, Jesus began to tell them that some bad things were going to come down and life was about to change. He would suffer many things and be crucified, and then God would resurrect Him. But they could not hear any of this nonsense. Then the act has been done. The guards have taken him away. The courts convicted him. The sentence pronounced and carried out. They scattered in every direction in fear for their lives. They were overwhelmed by grief and deep sorrow. "We had thought that He was the one to redeem Israel," two disciples said on to the road to Emmaus. Only sorrow and fear remain.

But not for long. In a simple account of the resurrection, Luke's gospel tells us that very early in the morning, some women, Mary Magdalene, Joanne, and Mary, the mother of James, took spices to the tomb. To their surprise, the stone door of the tomb was rolled open. Two men, angels, were there and the women bowed down in fear. One angel spoke, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen! Remember how He told you, while He was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again. Then they remembered His words'" and believed.

They ran home and told the male disciples who we are told: "did not believe them." But Peter must have had a spark of hope. He runs to the tomb, sees the stone rolled away, then the linens lying by themselves and the tomb empty. Then Luke tells us, Peter "wondered to himself what had happened."

Let's linger for a moment at the empty tomb with Peter wondering. Because Peter is a stand-in for us. He always is. So many of us wonder about the resurrection of Jesus. Such a proclamation for people of an earlier time was hard to believe. How much more so for us modern scientific people. Some really wonderful followers in the way of Jesus tell me that if they were to find the body of Jesus, it would make no difference for them. They would still follow His teachings. Others say, what is important is that the spirit of Jesus be resurrected and be reincarnated in His followers, because at the end of the day, what matters is what we do in this life to make Christ alive again in the world. And then many others insist that the only way to believe is in a resurrected physical body. Not to believe this is to have faith in vain. Anything less robs our faith of its true meaning.

The truth is no one has ever seen the resurrection. I have talked to people who have had near death experiences and who will swear to your face that life after death is real. I have a close relative who tells me of literally seeing her little sister appearing to her after her death instructing her to tell their mother that she is now doing well because she is with Jesus. You cannot prove what actually happened to either of them, but both would tell you that their experience was absolutely real and they have no doubt about it. So too was the experience of those first disciples who were given an experience of seeing and hearing Jesus after His resurrection. They did not see Jesus being resurrected. But if you could ask them, they would tell you what they experience not only was real for them but changed the course of their lives.

In Luke's gospel, we are told that those first to experience the resurrected Jesus are two disciples on the road to Emmaus, one named Cleopas and the other unnamed. In the breaking of the bread, their eyes are open and they recognize Jesus, who had been walking with them and teaching them concerning the Messiah. They see Him for a flash as the resurrected Lord and then He disappears. After that, He is experienced again, this time by the disciples, who saw Him and believed. In some real sense, in this experience of Him resurrected, the disciples themselves began to manifest Him in their lives. They themselves shared in the resurrection.

What is important is that we believe God can, in some mysterious way, raise Jesus from the dead. Because if God can raise Jesus from the dead, then there is a reason to

hope. Our despair will not last forever. Our losses will not defeat us. The unexpected turns in our life will not have the last word or be the end of our story.

We think of Easter Sunday as something that has always been celebrated by Christians, but that is not true. Early Christians understood that every time they came together to worship, the risen Christ was appearing among them. Imagine that every time they gather, they experienced the resurrected Jesus. What if we were to approach our lives with the expectation that each day, we can experience the resurrected Jesus with us, that every moment is a chance to press the reset button, and begin anew?

When I was a young associate pastor in Greenwood, Mississippi, we had a lovely older couple who had been married over 60 years. I honestly do not think I ever saw the two of them apart, except for when he would drop her off at church and go to park the car. They were two peas-in-a-pod, as devoted to one another as anyone I had known. One day the senior pastor called to tell me that George had climbed to the top of a short ladder, fell down hard on the brick floor, and had died. All of us who knew them felt the pain and wondered how in the world Eileen would survive without him. One church member said George was so devoted to her and she had become so dependent on him. Another said she did not even know how to write out a check; he paid all the bills. Others said he even picked out her clothes for her to wear for the next day. How will she survive? Who was going to help her?

After the funeral, members of the church organized a schedule to make sure Eileen had people checking in with her and take care of anything that might come up. They helped her pay bills and write checks. They reorganized her house, brought her meals, and went grocery shopping with her. After a few months of this well-intentioned attentiveness, Eileen called up the person in charge of the Eileen oversight group and said, "I appreciate what everyone has done. I just want you to know I can handle all of this on my own." Right before our eyes, a mature and independent woman came to life. In the midst of long grief, this dear woman found a new birth.

It is one of the oldest responses in the life of the Christian Church. For over a thousand years, the liturgists around the world on Easter Sunday say, "Christ is resurrected!" and the people respond joyfully together, "Christ is resurrected indeed!" Let's try that. Ready?

Liturgist: "Christ is resurrected!"

People: "Christ is resurrected indeed!"

Now you have all just done together something significant. You have each declared yourself to the world to be a radical. You have spoken what the disciples had experienced, and Christians in every generation have dared to believe. Life is stronger than death and love wins. Things are not as they seem.

Amen.