

Luke 24:1-12

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Following the forty days of Lent, the season of Easter has finally begun. Easter morning – a wonderful time to enter the Scriptures! One way to view Scripture, to view our Bible, is to think of it as a Place – a place where God and persons meet. If we see the Bible as a place, we are challenged to stand in that place, to see what we would have seen, to hear what we would have heard, to feel what we would have felt.

So, for a few minutes, relax, let your imaginations go, and walk along with me into Easter. Imagine the women waking up on that third day. Maybe they awoke without immediately remembering what lay ahead of them. Maybe their first waking seconds were full of blissful ignorance, only to be followed by the horrible realization of what they had to do. They gathered the bundles, carefully prepared the day before, and set off for the tomb, approaching it with growing dread and sorrow. They knew they would see the lifeless body of their beloved teacher, and how difficult it would be to touch his cold flesh, dress the wounds, and to prepare his lifeless body for proper burial.

Imagine a garden wet with dew in the early morning. See the women carrying those cloths and spices, their arms full. See the deep lines on their faces, see their sorrow and their tears. Walk with them through the garden toward the burial caves. Notice the tomb dug into the hillside with a large wheel of stone standing on edge, rolled away from the entrance.

Jewish burial practices varied. Some followed the tradition of other Near Eastern peoples and buried their dead in a hole in the ground. Others followed the practice found at Qumran – burying the dead in a shallow grave marked by a rock pile. Wealthy families often dug into the soft limestone rock to make shelves to hold stone coffins. These caves were usually closed by very heavy stone wheels that could be rolled back and forth in a groove. According to the Gospels, this is the kind of tomb in which Jesus' body was laid.

Look into the open mouth of the tomb, see the light coming from inside it. We watch as the light gets brighter and brighter until it almost blinds us. We cover our eyes. Our hearts are pounding with fear and excitement as we face the unknown.

We can only imagine their sense of grief and loss over the death of the man they had followed, believed, and loved for three years. The heart-broken women wanted to be close to Jesus in their grief.

Listen! Hear a voice speaking to us: Do not be afraid. Jesus is not here. He has risen! Remember when you were back in Galilee how he told you that he must suffer many things, die, and on the third rise again?

And then, we remember! We remember that and so much more! We remember: How much he loved us, and how we loved him in return. We remember how good he was, His kindness and the compassion he had for us, and for all kinds of people. The wise things he said about God and how we should live. His healing hands – touching the leper – and on the eyes of the man born blind.

We remember, too, only three days ago when we ate the last meal with him, how he said we would see him again, that we should not grieve, nor fear, nor be troubled, because he would never leave us, he would be with us always.

How quickly we had forgotten! How afraid we have been! How overcome with sorrow and despair! And suddenly, we *know* – we don't know how we know – but we know that death is not the end, that Jesus is alive and very near us.

Even though Jesus predicted his death ... and resurrection ... several times throughout his ministry, no one greets the news that God has raised Jesus from the grave and defeated death by saying, "Praise God!" No one shouts "Hallelujah" when they hear that their friend Jesus has been raised to life. And absolutely no one, upon hearing the news that death itself could not hold the Lord of Glory captive, says, "I knew it – just like he said!"

E. B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web*, once watched his wife Katharine plant flower bulbs in her garden, just before she died, in the last autumn of her life. They both knew she was dying. Even so, he was amused at the sight of the woman he loved continuing to take her shovel to the soil. He wrote: "There was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance ... the small hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection."

Have you ever come across people like Katharine White? People who were coming right up against the reality of death, even when they knew it was right around the corner, but never once complained, never panicked, but lived their last days as if – well, as if life would never end? There is a certain peace about such people that is enviable. How does one sit there with a detailed flower chart under the dark skies of their last October? What wisdom allows a person to stare down death in such a way?

A well-known cartoonist, John Callahan is a quadriplegic, paralysed as a result of a car accident during his youth. Of all his cartoons, a favourite of many shows Jesus hanging on a cross – but Jesus' head isn't bowed. Instead, Jesus is grinning, in fact, he's absolutely beaming. Above his head is tacked the traditional placard. But it doesn't say, INRI, the famous Latin acronym for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." In its place is a sign that reads: TGIF. *Thank God It's Friday*. Jesus himself would probably laugh at this placard. But there's an interesting question behind the cartoon - a question that's really about resurrection. How does John Callahan, his life as good as over after his car accident, now find such joy and humour in what he does? What inner wisdom allows a person to thumb his nose at death in such a liberating way? What releases people from their tombs on this side of the grave?

All of us, at some time, are "entombed" by something. Easter faith ebbs and flows. Events in this life shake us. Almost every member of any church has either experienced, or is going through, an event in their lives that seems totally paralysing, where life seems all but over. Of course, according to Jesus, it isn't. But how do we

come to that confident moment where the resurrection becomes the ultimate reality in our lives, even in the midst of actual death, or what feels a whole lot like it? There is a big difference between saying: “Christ is risen!” on Easter Sunday with a joyful throng, and allowing that resurrection reality to permeate and define our days.

Some women came to a tomb on that Sunday so long ago. These grave-checkers are not named until about seventy-five percent of this Easter story is told. Luke uses the collective pronoun “they” a total of eight times before finally bothering to identify the women. This is undoubtedly Luke’s way of pulling us into the story.

For all the joy that Easter morning holds for Christians, it’s important to linger at the tomb just a bit and recall how observant Jewish people marked death – quite a contrast to how modern people often want to “get through it” as quickly as possible. Among observant Jews, those closest to the deceased observe *shiva* for seven days following the death. During *shiva* one does not work, bathe, put on shoes, engage in sex, read Torah, or have one’s hair cut - and all mirrors are covered. The mourners are to behave as though they themselves had died. A month-long period follows that first week, and then, following that first month, a tempered year of mourning ensues. This ancient ritual, used to mark an extended period of grief is undoubtedly what these women were beginning that first Easter morning – a healthy way to deal with death, to face grief head-on.

But something happens to interrupt all this. Something happens to interrupt the *shiva*, the mourning, the smothering grief. So, what is that something? Well, it’s

not as obvious as you may think.

Two dazzling men suddenly appear. They scare the living daylight out of these women. But they are the key to unlocking Easter. Notice how they relate to these women, full of sorrow, who have come to the cemetery to begin their *shiva*. Here's what you would expect from angels, if that's what they are: you'd expect a little comfort, a few "fear nots" thrown around, an arm around somebody's shoulder. "There, there," they might say. But no, here's what these dazzling men offer: "What the heck are you doing here looking for your friend among dead people? Well, he's not here! Sorry, you just missed him." Few would ever be so bold with grieving people bringing flowers to a grave. Remember: all of this compassionate counsel occurs in the middle of a tomb. Allow that to soak in.

There's more. We're approaching the key to this Easter story and the key to our own serenity as we kneel in the dirt in the dark days of our own future dying October. The dazzling men say, "*Remember*, remember how he told you ... that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Remember all that. In the middle of that tomb the women are encouraged to recall the very words that Jesus once shared with them. *In the middle of that tomb*, they are urged to make his words present, to make his words real, to bring *life* to his words.

They are *told* that Jesus has risen, but they do not see the risen Jesus himself. What they have is a word, a message. "Then." *Then*. It's the most important

word in the entire story. “*Then* they remembered his words.” At that moment, in the middle of that cemetery, they recalled the words of Jesus and sprang forth from the tomb. *Easter happened – then*. The words they recalled – not the emptiness of the space, not the missing body, *but the words* – freed them from the pall of death. They are awakened from their collective amnesia to an Easter existence. They snap out of it. They are re-created through his words.

The Greek work here for “remember” is the same word used every Sunday in the Eucharist over bread and wine: “Do this in *remembrance* of me.” This is not the same as saying, “Let’s be sure to remember the life of Martin Luther. At Holy Communion, we are not commemorating a dead hero and recalling his important life once upon a time long ago. Here, the word “remember” is used in another way, a different way. This word intends to bring the past into the actual present into real time – into our time. When we “remember” Christ in such a way, it is like waking up, or opening our eyes, or taking a cold shower. Remembering Jesus in this way not only recalls his past, but also creates our present. Luke says *that* is Easter. That remembering is Easter.

This brings the Easter experience uncomfortably close, because this is precisely what we have – the word of resurrection. One would think God would work differently. It would seem so much easier to have the women come to the tomb and watch Jesus walk out into the light of a new day. And it would seem much easier for Jesus simply to appear in dazzling glory to us, who gather on an Easter morning generations later. And this is precisely where our situation is like that of the women

on the first Easter: we are all given a message of resurrection, which flies in the face of what we know to be true.

The only logical response to such a message is disbelief. The Easter message calls us from our old belief in death – to a new belief in life. The claim that the tomb could not hold Jesus, and the idea that the one who died by crucifixion has now risen is so outrageous that it might make you wonder whether it might – just might – be true.

Those who gather for worship on Easter Sunday follow in the footsteps of Peter. They have heard the rumour that Jesus is alive and come to hear again for themselves: "What if it is true? What if death is real, but not final? What if Jesus is not merely past but present? What if Jesus were to meet me here? What would life be then?" The Easter story continues far beyond, as God continues to challenge the certainty of death with the promise of life.

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" asked the dazzling strangers. Seek the living? Were they seeking the living? No, they were seeking the dead. *"Why do you seek the living among the dead?"* We can ask ourselves the same question, every time we are tempted to relegate Jesus to some past history, every time we recall the Last Supper at the communion table and re-enact a funeral service. Why do we forget that Christ is risen and have to be reminded again and again? Why do we live as if Jesus Christ had not risen, as if he were dead and buried somewhere, as if his body were still cold in a tomb, two thousand years old?

Imagine standing at the table on an ordinary Sunday morning – talking about his death, his passion, thinking of the bread and wine as symbols of a dead body, only to hear him whisper in your ear, *"Why do you seek the living among the dead?"* The dazzling men reminded the women of Jesus' own words, and as the words came back to the women, they began to believe.

They believed because of what they had been told! We are told the same thing over and over, by the church, by the scriptures, by the creeds we say, by the words of Jesus himself, addressed, not to the women at the tomb, but to us, *"Lo, I am with you always."* Always ... always ... always. With us always, without fail, without exception – risen and alive and working in the world.

So, remember. *Remember.* Here's the secret to planting flower bulbs under a late October sky, or even saying TGIF from your own cross. Here's the real key to living an Easter life: Just one verse. *"Then they remembered his words."*

Our mission at Easter is to remember and to echo the women at the tomb. Proclaim the Resurrection. AND, offer a space for the Risen Christ to touch our hearts and deliver us from rolling our eyes in disbelief into a running leap of faith.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Amen.