

Sermon – April 18, 2021  
“Rise from the dead on the third day”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 24:36b-48

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Christ is Risen! I think with a few more weeks of practice we will have it. One more time, Christ is Risen! I would like to thank Judy and Kevin for allowing Kay and me to have a week off. I greatly appreciate them filling in while I was gone. We were able to rest and to catch up on a number of tasks, some that had been languishing for years. It is good to be back with you this morning as we continue to celebrate Easter. Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

Let me provide some background so that we may all be able to better place this morning's text into its context. The calendar time for this scripture is still Easter, the first day of the week. So far on this day in Luke's Gospel, women have gone to the tomb, found it empty, and returned to report this to the disciples. Jesus has appeared on the road to Emmaus to two disciples who have left Jerusalem to return to their former lives. During their walk with this stranger, they have told him that they had hoped that Jesus, whom they had followed, would be the one to redeem Israel, but now he is dead and there is no hope for redemption. They have recognized the risen Jesus in the breaking of the bread and then returned to Jerusalem to report what has happened. Possibly those two disciples are in the room with all of the other disciples who have remained in Jerusalem, and the news from those returning from Emmaus may be the reason that a discussion about Jesus is underway in the upper room. The cross and an empty tomb are events that cannot be processed correctly without help. These events need the understanding of the resurrection for them to be made clear.

Into this discussion appears Jesus, who stands among them and greets them with “Peace be with you.” We will need to recall that in Luke's Gospel peace means salvation. The peace that Jesus speaks to here is more than the Shalom of the Old Testament. For Luke, the idea of peace connects to salvation and being reconciled to God. Jesus' words of greeting are more than

words to calm those in the room. He tells the disciples salvation has come and is standing among them.

It is a challenge for us to imagine or understand this moment and the fear the disciples have at what they are seeing. Someone or something is speaking peace to them and is standing among them. They may have some recognition of this as Jesus, but their minds only understand him as dead, so they think these words come from a disembodied spirit or soul of Jesus and they are startled and terrified. Notice that Jesus does not tell them not to be afraid, the almost standard words angels tell to those to whom they appear in order to release them from fear. This is not an angel. Jesus begins to lead the disciples into understanding that the one who now stands in their presence talking with them is not an angel, spirit, or phantom, but is Jesus resurrected from the dead. The disciples' reaction to Jesus' sudden appearance is understandable. Jesus is dead, he died days ago on the cross, and many of those present witnessed that event. Even though they have been told the tomb is empty, they are not expecting Jesus. Even though they are gathered to discuss Jesus and his possible appearance to the two from Emmaus, they do not yet understand the events that are happening on Easter. They do not yet understand the cross and the empty tomb.

Jesus begins to lead them into an understanding of what has occurred and what the cross and an empty tomb mean. He begins to offer them physical evidence to help open their minds to understand that Jesus is risen from the dead. Notice that forms of the word "see" occur some six times in these verses. Jesus wants his disciples to see something and then be witnesses to what they have seen. First, Jesus offers them an opportunity to see the marks on his hands and his feet. This evidence rules out that Jesus who stands before them is a resuscitated body. This body before them bears identifiable marks of the nails from crucifixion, but it is not a body that has the marks of all of the trauma of his passion and suffering. Ambrose, an ancient writer, speaks of these marks. He says, "The very wounds that Jesus shows his disciples are the wounds he will show the Father in heaven as trophies of our salvation." Jesus shows the disciples flesh and bones and not a spirit. This is not a resuscitated body that has somehow survived the cross and three days in a tomb. This is something different, something that has flesh and bones and yet bears the marks of the cross. Jesus tells the disciples to touch and see. He wants them to understand that he is not a spirit or vision, but a real physical presence, one made of flesh and bones. They are to see him, to become witnesses that he is alive.

Notice that Jesus tells the disciples “it is I myself.” This statement connects the Jesus they knew from before the crucifixion with the Jesus who is now standing before them after the resurrection. There is continuity between Jesus as the Son of Man and the resurrected Jesus. As the disciples see these things, some joy begins to grow in them, yet it is shaded by doubts. There may be joy at seeing and hearing Jesus, but still there is disbelief and wondering about what is happening. The disciples are still struggling to process the cross and empty tomb, and now they are confronted with Jesus bearing the marks of the cross standing before them in the flesh. How hard it must be to see and understand a resurrected Jesus. The disciples are trying to understand what is happening, but questions and doubts still emerge like the thought, “perhaps this is something other than someone who is alive.” This and similar ideas are the thoughts that come into their minds. Jesus sees their hearts and moves to erase their doubts.

To address their growing doubts, Jesus asks for something to eat. They give him a piece of broiled fish and he eats it in front of them. This action shows the disciples that Jesus is not a spirit without a body, but is a physical presence. This action speaks to us that death for those who believe in Jesus is not the end, and that there is a continued physical aspect to the resurrected life. Death is not the end but a transition to something new. Again, in the midst of table fellowship, in the sharing of a meal, Jesus is recognized. As those who broke bread with Jesus in Emmaus had their eyes opened in the breaking of the bread, here in the upper room with the eating of fish comes recognition of a resurrected Jesus who is now alive.

With the questions about who this is standing among them and talking to them answered, Jesus turns to key teaching needed for these witnesses. Jesus will now put them on a path to understand the cross, the empty tomb, and his resurrected body. Jesus reminds the disciples that all that was written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled. The inclusion of the psalms in the list expands the words written about Jesus to include all of scripture. Jesus is not making the point that there are specific singular examples in scripture that must be fulfilled, but that all of scripture points to a Messiah who will suffer, die, and be raised so that all people may be reconciled to God. It is through the cross, the empty tomb, and the resurrection of the Messiah that God’s plan to redeem all people has always pointed. Jesus’ death was not plan B, an afterthought of how to work out salvation of all people if Jesus were rejected. This way of the cross was always God’s plan. Remember that the disciples on the road to Emmaus tell Jesus that their hopes in Jesus as the Messiah were ended

with his death on the cross. In reality, it is through the cross and Jesus' resurrection that we are reconciled to God, by belief in what Jesus has done. Jesus opens the disciples' minds to grasp that the whole of scripture points to such a Messiah. Scripture points to salvation that comes through the anointed one of God who suffers, dies, and is raised on the third day. Jesus gives these disciples the help they need to process the cross, the empty tomb, and a risen Lord who stands among them, now physically present as the first to be resurrected from the dead. What God has planned has been done. Proof stands physically among them speaking to them, eating with them, and opening their minds to understand at last the cross, the empty tomb, and a resurrected Messiah.

Jesus then gives his disciples clarity on what their response to what they have witnessed is to be. They are to start in Jerusalem and to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins there and go forth from Jerusalem to be witnesses to all nations. Notice the reversal in the focus of this task. Before Jesus' resurrection, all came to Jerusalem to worship. Jerusalem was the center of faith in the one true God. Now it is from Jerusalem they are to go out to the ends of the world and share the good news. They are to be witnesses to the cross, an empty tomb, and a resurrected Jesus. They are to be witnesses who go out into the world to share what these things mean. No longer is Jerusalem the center. Now Christ is the center and will be taken everywhere by his disciples.

The task Jesus gives to these disciples who are witnesses to these things is also our task as those who believe in Jesus and who are seeking to grow into his likeness. We are to be those who are sharing this great good news. The disciples have witnessed these things with their own eyes. They saw the suffering of the cross, they ran and looked into the empty tomb and saw the missing body, and now they have seen with their eyes the risen Lord standing among them. They have seen Jesus and witnessed firsthand the evidence of his resurrected body. They are to go forth and share with all people what God has done through Jesus.

We are gathered here this morning in the name of Jesus and we should expect him to come and be among us, to be present in this place with us. Jesus is present here this morning through the lives of those who are now the body of Christ, the church. Look around this room and behold the body of Christ. We are not eyewitnesses to the cross, the tomb, and the resurrected Jesus, but we have the accounts written down for us from those who were eyewitnesses, and we have our own witness, our own unique story of how Jesus has appeared to

us and changed us. We know what we were before we met Christ and we know what we are as we seek to grow into Jesus' likeness. We also, as disciples of Christ, are sent out to share this great good news. We have believed, been reborn, have been transformed, and are now those who are seeking to grow up into Christ. We belong to Jesus and are seeking to grow into his image. We are becoming Jesus' disciples, and as his disciples, we are to take our witness and go into the world to tell others about Jesus and to teach them who Jesus is, and as they believe, to help them grow up into his image and become witnesses as well. We may be called to go and to share our witness with one of the 1600 unreached people groups in some distant place. But more likely, God has used our desires, the stirring of our hearts, to leave where we once were and to come to this place at this time to be witnesses to people here who do not know this great good news. We are called to be witnesses to our family, friends, neighbors, and those we don't yet know here in this place. Disciples are called to share their own witness with others, not necessarily by going door to door and confronting people, but, by following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to be those who will develop a relationship with those we are led to and then be a witness to them by loving them, and sharing what those in the upper room witnessed with their own eyes and what transformation God has brought in our life.

I realize that we may not be comfortable with the idea of sharing our witness with others. I don't think the disciples who were fearing for their lives in the upper room on this Easter evening had any plans to be those sent out into the world as witnesses. But as we are gathered here this morning, we need to understand that they did go, for we have their witness with us today. Jesus' call to his disciples today is the same as it was on that first Easter, "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Let us begin to pray that the Holy Spirit will place on our hearts those in our lives in this community who we are being sent to with this great good news and that we will join with Jesus in his mission to all people.

*Pray with me: Jesus, we thank you for the cross, an empty tomb, and the witness of the disciples to your resurrection. Lord, open our minds to grasp what the scriptures hold about you as Messiah and give us hearts for those in this place that you would have us be witnesses to right here and right now. Amen*