

Luke 24:1-12
Resurrection Now!
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Rick Elias got his life back to live all over again. This regular, everyday guy thought this was a day like any other. He was setting off on a business trip when all of a sudden there was a huge explosion, the cabin of the plane filled with smoke, the engine started to sound like a jack hammer and then went silent.... He could read the terror on the flight attendant's face; this was the end. He heard the three words you never want to hear the airline pilot say, "Brace for impact." The plane started to turn, and with it, his life.

Things can change in an instant. It's not that he was afraid to die, but that he was sad, so sad. As he thought about the flight path this plane was on as it hurled toward the Hudson River, he began to think about the flight plan his life was on. As a relatively young man, he began to think about the priorities, the people, the experiences, and he didn't like what he saw, and so he was sad.

As a matter of fact, Rick got his life back that day. He didn't actually die because he was on US Airways flight 1541, captained by Sully Sullenberger who was miraculously able to redirect the plane, barely passing over the George Washington Bridge, and touched it down in the Hudson River.

In a Ted Talk Rick Elias gives, he says that he was given the gift of two miracles that day. "The first is that I survived. And the second is that I was given the gift to see into the future and to come back and live differently."

It seems to me that's what Easter is for us this morning. We get to look into the future and then have the opportunity to live life differently. And so with this vision of an empty tomb, a few linen garments folded neatly as its only content, let's turn together in our copies of scripture to our Gospel lesson for this morning, Luke chapter 24.

And out of reverence and honor for the reading of God's Word, I invite you to stand with me as I read the words that give ultimate hope and promise to all people, the words of Jesus' glorious resurrection. And when I'm finished, I'll say "This is the word of the Lord," so that if you believe it to be true in your heart, you can respond by saying, "Thanks be to God."

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, 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."

And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all 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.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. And may the same Holy Spirit that raised Christ Jesus from the grave, raise these words up within us that they may be the wellspring of living water overflowing to everlasting life. Amen and Amen.

There are no throw away words in the Bible, sometimes it is the most innocuous statements that can carry the greatest weight. The Good Friday narrative closes in chapter 23 with Joseph of Arimathea taking the body of Jesus of Nazareth down from the cross, wrapping him in a linen cloth, and putting him in the tomb. It was all he could do before the Sabbath began. Everyone thought this was the end.

Then we come to chapter 24, and this tiny preposition that begins the chapter might be the most important word we hear this morning. They took him down, laid him in the tomb, then rested because it was the Sabbath...“But.”

We hang onto the BUTs. You’ve just lost your job, BUT there’s a new opportunity around the corner. You’re swimming in credit card debt, BUT there is a program to help you climb out. The diagnosis is conclusive, BUT she is the best surgeon there is and believes she can remove the growth. The world of Jesus’ followers came crashing down on Friday...

But on the first day of the week, at dawn, the women came to the tomb and found it empty. This changes everything. All of a sudden, what we thought was true on Friday changes in an instant. But what happens when we come face to face with the news?

Luke tells us that it left them “perplexed” – this is classic God, when God interrupts our lives more often it leaves people confused. Then they saw two men in dazzling garments beside them, and they were “terrified.” This is the Bible’s favorite word when God comes to us. This is how the Easter story begins. It does not restore the illusion that we’re in control over our lives. Just the opposite, it claims there is less control than we think. Easter claims we don’t just live the best we can and then die and hopefully enter a place vaguely described as “heaven.” Easter claims that’s not real life at all. It’s just avoiding death, which is never the same thing as living.

You might be able to understand that in the heat of the moment, they still didn’t get it. But why?

What I’d like to suggest is that Mary and the disciples don’t get it because they still don’t understand what it means to have a future. Especially a future, as the prophet Jeremiah says, that is “filled with hope.”

I recently read a fascinating little book by the historian Thomas Cahill called *The Gifts of the Jews*. When God spoke individually and personally to Avram, something entirely new to human history was begun. Cahill writes: “If we had lived in the second millennium BC and could have canvassed the nations, what would they say to Avram hearing God call him to leave the city and enter into a personal relationship? In most of Africa and Europe they would have spoke of the heavenly symbols of the Great Wheel of Life and Death, and said that his fate and the fate of his family were from eternity and utterly inescapable. The Egyptians would have said, there is none born wise, so (just) copy the patterns of the forefathers. The ancient Mayans in America would point to their circular calendars that repeat the patterns of history in unvarying succession. Everything that comes around goes around and that everything is fixed. To the Far eastern mystics would have said, sit yourself down beside a flowing river and meditate until to come to peace with the Great Wheel of time and your own inescapable fate.”

You see what began with Avram, and is now fulfilled in the emptiness of the tomb is God’s promise that human life is not just fate, on some merciless wheel of time, but that the human story is now linear, and before it, a future.

The reason why the disciples in verses 4 and 11 thought the story was perplexing and an idle tale is that they are still living as though they didn’t have a future. Life to them was still cyclical. We’ve come to care for the dead body, because like so many before him Jesus of Nazareth will still be in the tomb.

You all have come here this morning for one reason or another. You might be here because family brought you. You might be here because this is just what you do before the mandatory Easter dinner of ham and scalloped potatoes. Or you might be here because you yearn to hear the story and once again ask the question, could it be true? In a sense, all of us are like the women and disciples who thought it was an idle tale. Whether we struggle to believe with our mind that Jesus could actually and bodily raise, or whether we disbelieve with our actions, we still like to take our grave clothes with us.

Did you see the only thing left in the tomb was a pile of linen grave clothes? Jesus literally left everything in the tomb when he arose. Yet we have the tendency to want to wear our grave clothes: our hang ups, our insecurities, our bitterness, our hurt into the future.

One of our dearest friends in ministry is the Adams Family—not the one you’re all thinking of right now. Joel and Julie are urban missionaries in Denver, but before that they worked with at risk teenagers. They would counsel young people who were trying to put their lives back in order. Some were coming off drugs and other addictions, some were coming out of homes that were a complete war zone. All of them were learning what it meant to live lives of freedom and restoration.

While in their program, Joel and Julie would work with them, teaching them how to keep their rooms clean, show them what a balanced and reasonably secure life looks like. Then

before sending them out into the working world or back into school, each of them would get a few new outfits, fresh clean clothes that would complete their fresh start; their new beginning.

A few weeks later, Joel said, they would return to check on the youth, and more often than not what they would find is a messy room with the new clothes piled in a heap in the corner. Here before them would stand the same young person who had just completed the program into new life, wearing the same grungy, worn out grave clothes in which they'd found them. "Why are you still wearing these old clothes?" they would say. Their response, "These clothes are just more comfortable, after all, I'm used to wearing these clothes."

You know, so often this is the view we Christians take of the resurrection. We may not be standing outside in disbelief, but we do have the tendency to want to take our grave clothes with us. Because we fear that in placing our faith fully in the hands of God and not in our achievements and abilities will mean that we step out of that grave vulnerable and exposed.

Two caterpillars were crawling along a leaf when a butterfly flew past overhead. One caterpillar turned to the other one and said: "You'll never get me up in one of those things."

But the beauty of Easter morning is that when Jesus stepped out of that tomb, he stepped into a new day that had not existed since the dawn of creation. Sin was beaten. And make no mistake about it, the thing Jesus came into the world to do, more than anything else, is conquer sin.

Jesus is the new man, and the life he invites you to step into is a life you've never lived before. It's bold new territory beyond the grave, beyond the trappings of sin in our lives, beyond the insecurity that we're not good enough, beyond our past and the things we did that we think are unforgivable, beyond all injustice, beyond all hatred, beyond all anger or envy or malice, beyond the world that the devil has done such a fine job mucking up. Revelation tells us that what Jesus is inviting you and me into is what John calls the new heaven and the new earth. Easter is the dawn of the new day when we can see beyond the barricade of what was and step into the dawn of redeeming grace.

Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* epitomizes this dawn of redeeming grace. When the thief who spent 19 years of prison labor is released only to despise himself, believing he is what everyone has said of him. When Jean Valjean comes face to face with the Bishop he has disgraced, what Valjean sees is not the turning of the wheel back to justice, but the unfolding of that circle into the dawn of a new day. Instead of seeing retribution, he encounters grace. A grace that changed everything, and turned Valjean from a prisoner to a man with a future.

I want to show the closing chorus to the film adaptation, a heart lifting song that reminds us that there is a new dawn approaching – A new Kingdom and a new Everlasting King.

Grace does this. Grace opens the doors to closed lives. Believe it today, because of the resurrection, even if it seems too good to be true, it isn't. Let it sink deep into your heart and into the life of this community that we are people who above all have a future because Jesus left it all behind and stepped out of the tomb.