

Text: Luke 24: 1-12

Title: Amazing

Date: April 4, 2010

I have a picture in my mind, don't we all, what the first moments of the resurrection looked like? The predawn morning light peeks over the tomb, guarded by a contingent of Roman soldiers. Suddenly, without sound, the stone rolls away from the tomb, revealing a blinding light. The soldiers stand transfixed, as the resurrected Christ strolls past, their eyes reflecting the terror of what they know to be impossible. Three women come upon the scene moments after the soldiers flee, wondering how and why the stone was rolled away. They encounter an angel, words pass, and they beat feet back to report to the disciples.... Peter and John arrive to investigate, only to leave in wonder. It is an amazing sight- one we've conjured up completely in our minds, equal parts Gospel stories, and science fiction and zombie movies we've seen.

The fact of the matter is that the Resurrection is recorded in all four of the Gospels and we unconsciously harmonize them in our minds. But they are not the same. Matthew includes the Romans- the others don't. everyone mentions the women, but Matthew lists Mary & Mary; Mark lists Mary, Mary & Salome; John only talks about Mary Magdalene and Luke doesn't name them in the beginning at all. The real problem with trying to fit all the Gospel accounts into one story is that when we don't let the individual gospel writers tell their story, we might miss what they really want us to get. This really shows up in Luke.

Luke is the historian of the bunch. He is very upfront- he is making what he calls an orderly account from a variety of sources. It's fair to say that Luke's entire Gospel has been leading to this moment. Sure, he's the one who tracks down Mary to get her take on the Christmas story- but look at what he does. The opening acts are all about angels: Gabriel's visits to Zechariah and Mary and the announcement of the angels to the shepherds. Jesus' identity is proclaimed at his dedication in the Temple by the prophets Simeon and Anna who represent the faithful remnant of the Jews; now at the end we have Joseph of Arimathea, whose righteousness stands in stark contrast to the corruption of the chief priests and scribes. Now what do we see at the Resurrection? - Again with the angels!

The women react just the way that one would expect- they fall to the ground terrified! We are not told the men in white are angels- but they sure fit the expected description! Luke does tell us that there are 2 of them- so according to Mosaic Law, they could serve as credible witnesses. They tell the women 2 things: First and foremost, they tell them that Jesus is alive. He has been risen- that he is no longer among the dead.

Can you imagine what must have been going through the minds of Mary, Joanna, Mary and the other women? He has been raised- what can that possible be about? Almost to answer this unspoken question, the angels remind them of what Jesus has been talking about since Galilee. Luke organized his Gospel along the lines of a gigantic road trip. For the first part of his ministry, Jesus stayed in the North, centering around Galilee. But starting towards the end of chapter 9 Jesus turns toward Jerusalem- teaching, healing and casting out demons along the way. From the very beginning Jesus has been saying things like *the Son of Man is going to be betrayed by human hands; and The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised*.

Here is what Luke finds so amazing. It's not so much the empty tomb as it is the reason for the empty tomb. John may be more poetic with his For God so loved the world- but Luke is more direct: **the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified...** Jesus had been brought before the Sanhedrin and endured false accusations. Pilate had declared him innocent and then tried to palm him off on Herod. The Roman soldiers had struck him, spat at him and placed a robe on his bloody shoulders. Back Jesus is sent to Pilate, who declares him innocent again- and gives the mob their choice of men to be freed- Jesus or the terrorist Bar Abbas. The people chose Bar Abbas and demanded Jesus be crucified. That Jesus was innocent was obvious to everyone- even the Roman Centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail declared that Jesus was innocent. What simply bowls Luke over is **that Jesus came to lay down his life for the very same people who would kill him!**

Jesus being Jesus knew this- and went ahead anyway. This is God's love at its most sublime: God grants us freedom to reject God's own love and mercy. I don't know

how to put this into words, how does one even begin to describe the love that will never cease to love and at the same time never overrule our freedom to reject that love?

How do the women respond? They return to the disciples to report what they had seen. They should have been believed- for they were reporting what they had seen firsthand, there were more than 2 of them and that the other disciples already knew their character, for them had been following Jesus since Galilee. But the other disciples blow them off, writing them off as hysterical. But Peter went to see for himself- and found the tomb empty and the burial wraps discarded just as they said. So he goes home amazed at what happened. OK, that's a fair reaction. And we know that Peter and the other disciples come around- and that it takes Jesus showing up in person to convince them.

But how do we respond? Forget that we already know about Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit and the last 2000 years of church history. How do we deal with the fact that Jesus laid down his life for us?

After all, this is the kind of action that demands a reaction, we just can't ignore it. A life given places a demand on our lives to live accordingly. It strikes me that we have one of two options. We can functionally deny that Jesus died for us by focusing not on what Jesus did for us but on our own guilt. Woe is me for I am a sinner and my sin caused the death of Jesus. OK, that's a reasonable reaction- but talk about a dead end! Feeling guilt for something we have been forgiven for is just another way of forgetting that we are forgiven. It places all the focus back on us, what we have done or what we have failed to do. That road takes us to the cross all right, but is the cross on Good Friday, not the empty Tomb of Easter morning!

The other option is to recognize that Jesus' death and resurrection makes us very special people. We are worth the Lord God dying for! I know that sounds strange, but the simple fact is that we are not worthy for God to do anything for us. We are the sinners that Jesus came for; we are the sinners no different from those who called for his blood. No different, **except** for a little thing called salvation by faith alone. Jesus said that all who believe in him are forgiven. Period. All those forgiven by him receive the Holy Spirit- who cleanses and re-creates us from within. Now that we are filled with God's blessing we are able to go and share that blessing with others- so that others may experience for themselves what it means to be forgiven and free.

See, we are not so special that Jesus had to come for us; we are special **because** Jesus came for us. And that in itself is Amazing. This is the Good News for us this morning: that Jesus is good as His Word; that all of his promises are sure. Salvation is not so much a Get out of Hell Free card as it is a new and wonderful way to live here and now!

This is what we declare. This is what we bear witness to! That because Jesus is alive and well- we are too! Because Jesus died on the cross, the power that sin has had on my life is dead too! Because Jesus is alive, I am no longer enslaved to the patterns of the past- I am now free to live and love in the promises of the present and future!

Now there are times when we feel like the day before Easter, too tired to hope, to discouraged to love. There are times when we feel like Mary, Johanna, Mary and the others in that pre dawn light: crushed, depressed and defeated, going about the business at hand without joy, simply doing what must be done. But look what happened to them. The angels asked the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." They couldn't keep that to themselves- no matter how low they may have been feeling a moment before- they had to bear witness that Jesus was alive and that all of his promises are true. Amazing love results in Amazing transformations.

What was true then is still true today. Let us go forth from this place declaring by our lives that basic truth- the Amazing Love of Jesus demonstrated in our transformed lives. Join me- **HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!**