

## God Moves . . . out of the Tomb

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, April 17, 2022.

Luke 24:1-12

They were with Jesus in Galilee as he went from village to village, preaching good news to the poor, healing the sick, curing the lame, and proclaiming God's coming reign of justice and peace. They were with him as he journeyed to Jerusalem, following him as did the other disciples. They were present at his death, witnesses to his crucifixion. They were there when Jesus' lifeless body was laid in the tomb. And they were there at early dawn on that first Easter morning – the first to discover that the tomb was empty.

“They” were the women who followed Jesus. His male disciples may receive more attention in the gospels than the women do, but at the gospels' dramatic climax – Jesus' death and resurrection -- it is the women who become the leading characters in the story. When the going gets tough, it is the women who remain faithful to Jesus to the end.

All four gospels agree that women discovered the empty tomb. In John, it's Mary Magdalene alone. In Mark, it's Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. In Matthew, it's Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary.” Luke mentions the most women – five at the very least: the three he names (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James) and others who go unnamed (“the other women with them”).

These women had watched Jesus die an agonizing death. And they had watched Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' dead body down from the cross, wrap it in a linen cloth, and lay it in a rock-hewn tomb. These women were in mourning, their hearts filled with profound grief and sorrow. They loved Jesus dearly. They had put their greatest hopes in him. They had supported his public ministry. They had dreamed that Jesus would change the world, that he would be the one to fulfill God's promises, that he would finally establish God's reign of justice and peace, that God's will would be done on earth as it

is in heaven. But their hopes were dashed. Jesus died, and, they believed, the dream had died with him.

Now, early on Sunday morning, the first day of the week, the women returned to the tomb. Jesus' body had been entombed hastily before sundown on Friday -- the beginning of the Sabbath. There had not been time to prepare his body properly for burial. So the women waited until the Sabbath was over to return to the tomb with spices and ointments with which to anoint Jesus' body.

But when they arrived on that first Easter morning, they were surprised to find that the tomb was open! The great stone, which had covered the tomb's entrance, had been rolled away! The women entered the tomb and found that it was empty. Jesus' body was gone!

They were perplexed, to say the least. But their confusion quickly turned to terror when all of a sudden two men dressed in dazzling clothes appeared out of nowhere. The Greek word translated here as "dazzling" is the same word used to describe lightning, which may explain why the women immediately flinched when the two men appeared, ducking for cover, bending their heads down to the ground. Later on in this chapter, the women's experience is characterized as a vision of angels. But whether the visitors were men or whether they were angels, their message was clear. Jesus was not there! He had risen! He was alive!

"Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." And then the women remembered Jesus' words.

God, in Jesus Christ, was on the move again. Even death could not stop Jesus.

The women returned from the tomb and recounted their experience to the eleven apostles and to all the rest of Jesus' followers. But no one believed the women! Their astounding report was simply incredible. Who could possibly take them seriously? Their words were dismissed as "an idle tale." After all, an empty tomb didn't prove anything! Jesus' body could have been stolen for all they knew! And the testimony of angels? The women must have been hallucinating --

their critical faculties overcome by grief and sorrow. It's difficult to see clearly when your eyes are filled with tears!

Admittedly, Jesus' resurrection does strain credibility. It was an odd occurrence, a peculiar event, an altogether strange happening. It's not something we can explain scientifically. It's not something we can easily relate to from our everyday experience. It's not something we can fully understand. Indeed, it was as startling a revelation to Jesus' first-century disciples as it is to us today. So, can we trust the Easter story to be true? Or is it only a legend, a myth, a fairy tale -- not to be taken seriously?

Well, it seems to me that if the Easter story had been simply fabricated by the disciples, it is very unlikely that women would have been given such a central role. Remember that first-century Palestine was a patriarchal culture, a male-dominated society. Generally speaking, women did not have prominent roles in that society. Yet, in all four of the gospel accounts, women are the first to discover the empty tomb and the first to receive the news of Jesus' resurrection. Some of the women are even identified by name! If the Easter story were just a made up fairy tale, you can bet that the gospel writers would have given this central role in the story to men rather than women. So, for me, the central role of women gives the Easter story a great deal of credibility.

Now no one was there at the tomb to see what actually happened -- how the stone was rolled away and what really happened to Jesus' body. Had there been a security camera inside the tomb, we don't know what it would have recorded. Would it have shown us Jesus slowly sitting up, unwrapping the linen cloth from his body, rolling away the stone himself, and walking out of the tomb into the dawn's early light? Or would it have shown Jesus' body wrapped in linen cloths one moment and a split second later just the linen cloths by themselves, his body having disappeared in the blink of an eye? Or would the camera have recorded a bright flash of light and then only static? We simply don't know. No one was present to witness the actual moment of Jesus' resurrection. The women arrived afterwards, after the resurrection, after the tomb was already empty. All they could testify to was the empty tomb and their vision of angels who said that Jesus was alive! Only later would the resurrected Jesus appear to his disciples, and it would be those extraordinary

encounters with the living Christ that would give his disciples faith and their community new life.

As the New Testament scholar and civil rights pioneer Clarence Jordan once put it: "The crowning evidence that Jesus was alive was not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church."

There's something about the resurrection story that fascinates us, that keeps us coming back to hear the story retold, again and again. Perhaps it is the mystery of it all! Perhaps it is the wonder and awe that the story invokes in us! Perhaps it is the promise that after we die, at the end of time, we too will be raised to new life as was Jesus!

Perhaps that is why the Easter story has had such tremendous staying power. There is something about it that fascinates people, that draws people in. It is an unbelievable story that people believe in nevertheless. It is a story that has been told from one generation to the next, from one century to the next, for nearly two millennia. It is a story that is vital to more than two billion Christians around the world. Can a story be so important to so many people for so long without there being some truth to it? I wonder?

To believe in the resurrection is to have faith and confidence in the ultimate power of God to overcome evil, sin, and death. It is to believe that God's goodness ultimately triumphs over evil. It is to believe that God's offer of salvation can free us from our sin. It is to believe that nothing – not even death – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

God would not let Jesus' crucifixion be the end. God would not let evil, sin, and death have the last word. Instead, God brought new life out of death through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the resurrection hope. And that is what brings us here this day: to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to give God thanks and praise for the promise of new life that Christ brings! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Thanks be to God! Amen.