

**“From Darkness to Light”**

Introduction: If you were to scroll through the various resurrection accounts in the Bible, you would quickly notice that the gospel writers do not reveal a group of Jesus followers who, on that very first Easter Sunday, were overjoyed with the good news of resurrection, and who couldn't wait to put on their new Easter outfits and come to church to sing *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!* Rather, we meet disciples who, as they either come to the empty tomb or hear news from the tomb, are afraid and alarmed, trembling and bewildered, running this way and that to try and piece it together, and wondering in the back of their minds if it's all just plain nonsense. While we do see a sliver of joy and belief, it would take a while to sink in and process fully.

Skip ahead a couple of decades and we hear the Apostle Paul make the remarkable statement to the Christians in Colossae: “Since you have been raised with Christ. . .” How did that journey take place? How did followers of Jesus go from darkness to light, from puzzling over an empty tomb and strips of linen to understanding themselves as having been raised, with Christ, while they are still living?

I. Caring Women

A. Let's begin when that first Easter morning began (like mine did today!) before the sun came up, when it was still dark. Through the darkness, we glimpse a handful of women who are making their way to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. Evidently the burial had taken place in haste, needing to be done before the sun set on Friday, and the Sabbath began. Now that the sabbath had ended, the women wanted to check things out and see if they could contribute something to the burial of Jesus.

B. Of the group, John singles out Mary Magdalene. Jesus had expelled numerous demons from her and she had joined in with a group of faithful women who traveled with Jesus to care for his needs. Later in the morning she would have a personal encounter with the risen Jesus, but at this early hour, all she could see in the darkness was that the large stone had been rolled away from the entrance to his tomb; her conclusion, logical if you think about it, was that someone had come and stolen Jesus' body.

II. Running Disciples

A. And so she took off running, back to the city, back to where Peter and John were just waking up, or, maybe they had been up all night, still unable to sleep being overcome by the grief of crucifixion. Into that early morning hour Mary burst, crying out that Jesus' body had disappeared; in fact, it had been taken and no one knew where it was. You can almost hear the panic in her voice, can't you? Well, so could Peter and John and so they took off to the tomb, both of them running. (There is actually more running in these three verses than the rest of the NT!) Evidently, John had a better kick and so arrived at the tomb ahead of Peter, but he hesitated and did not go in. What would you have done? While he paused to peer in, he did notice that the linen burial cloths, with which a body in ancient times was wrapped, were just lying there. Perhaps it dawned on him that it would certainly be odd if someone had come to steal the body to actually stop and spend time unwrapping it first. While he was pondering this, Peter breathlessly arrived and, impetuous as always, and with a promise to himself to train harder in the weeks ahead, didn't pause for a second but crawled right in.

B. Having done so, Peter saw not only the linen cloths that had been around Jesus' body, but also the single cloth that had been wrapped around his head, a cloth that was typically wrapped under the chin and tied on top on ones' head in order to keep your mouth from falling open. When John finally screwed up his courage enough to join Peter, and saw the items lying there, he believed. So what did he see? Apparently, he saw that these cloths were not jumbled in a heap, as would have been if someone had been stealing the body, if they took the time to unwrap it all, but just lying in place, the head cloth separated from the body cloth. They looked, it seems, like a collapsed balloon that has just lost all of its air. It was as if Jesus body had simply just left them behind, right where they were.

C. It was enough to move John to faith. But, what did he believe, especially given the comment that they didn't yet understand from the Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead? Well, it seems as if John, at least, believed that Jesus was alive again. But the larger picture of what it all meant was not yet clear to him. On the other hand, Peter, it seemed, still had some pondering to do. Luke's account tells us that Peter went back home still puzzling and wondering about what had happened. What was certain is that Jesus' body had not been stolen, but something big and almost inexplicable had happened, something that felt a little like falling in love, perhaps, or the first real day of spring after a long winter, or the fiery top of the sun as it rises and bring light into a new day.

### III. Raised Followers

A. What would bring these, and other followers of Jesus, to the point of proclaiming the good news of resurrection far and wide, even risking their lives to do so? What would bring them the theological insight that all who put their trust in Jesus would be raised too, even while they were still alive? Well, it first took several post-resurrection appearances by Jesus to confirm that he was, indeed, risen. The first of these took place with Mary, who had returned and then stayed at the tomb after Peter and John had gone home. Jesus appeared to her and she became not only the first eyewitness, but the apostle to the apostles, the one who first shared with them the good news of resurrection.

B. Then, Jesus appeared twice to his disciples once that evening, and then again, a week later. Sometime after that, he appeared to them a third time up on the region of Galilee. They had gone there because that's where they remembered he said he'd meet them, but when they arrived, they really weren't sure what to do. Going back to fishing didn't seem like a bad idea because that's the world they knew. They also had families to look after and maybe, after following Jesus around for the better part of three years, they figured that the adventure was over and it was time to get a real job again!

C. So with Peter in the lead, out they went, back to familiar territory, back to what they knew best. Yet, they fished all night and they caught nothing. Did they still have it? Have we lost our touch? They must have wondered. I'm also not much of a fisherman but I know enough to know that if I've been out on the water all night, and am coming home with an empty net, I'm coming home frustrated and tired and sore and cold and hungry and in need of a hot shower and warm bed. What I don't want to hear is some smart aleck from the campsite next to me, with a coffee in one hand and a donut in the other, reminding me of my failure. "Children, do you not have anything to eat?"

Now, I don't think Jesus was trying to be obnoxious. Rather, Jesus often asks questions to get us to face the reality of our lives. The underlying question here seems to be, "Friends, how have you really done out there on your own, without me guiding and directing you?"

Illustration: A couple of weeks ago I came across an article in *The Washington Post* entitled: “Clergy who don’t believe in organized religion? Humanists think 2017 is their time to grow.” The article described a growing movement of congregations of people who don’t believe in God being led by pastors who don’t believe in God. But they are gathering together, the article reports, because they have a need to do justice, to feel hope, and to experience community.

Those, actually, are three wonderful yearnings of the human spirit. But I wonder what Jesus would ask us about pursuing them without him?

Where, he might ask, does your yearning for justice come from? What prompted you, as a little child, to shout out on the playground, “That’s not fair!” How do you determine what is just and what is not? Could it be that the Jesus who faced the most incredible injustice of the cross, and then rose in defeat of it, might know a thing or two about what is just, and about how we might go about pursuing it?

What about our yearning for hope? Where does that come from? Why do we need hope? Could it be because we have a sense deep down that things are not really right with the world, or even our lives, and we hope that what we see, or how things are, is not all there is? What is the ground of our hope? What can move us beyond merely wishful thinking? Could the one who defeated our most hopeless situation - death - by rising again, provide a solid ground for our hope that nothing else can?

And how about our yearning for community? Though peace and quiet is a true gift, why do we really not want to be alone for very long? Why is solitary confinement considered to be the worst penalty imaginable? Could it be because we are created in the image of a God who is relational at his core, existing as father, son, and holy spirit, and that we have, therefore, a kind of relational “gene” that needs to be satisfied? And if we find community, how do we live well within it? Could it be that the risen Jesus knows something about that, too? Though it’s getting ahead of the story, we see in fact that the resurrection of Jesus moved him to eventually send his Spirit—the Holy Spirit—God’s empowering presence, whose role among other things is to develop the fruit within us of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control, all virtues necessary for a community to flourish, virtues without which a community will fail, or at least not be very pleasant to be a part of!

Standing out early this morning in the drop dead gorgeous spot that is Conomo Point reminded me of the writings of the Apostle Paul where he suggests that since the creation of the world, God’s fingerprints—his eternal power and divine nature—can be clearly seen and understood from what has been made (Rom. 1:20). But our temptation is to wipe away his fingerprints, thinking it must be easier to live without his looking over our shoulder and telling us what to do. But as Jesus asked those fisherman when he saw their empty nets, “How’s that been working out for you?” But when they followed the voice of the risen Jesus and threw their nets as he directed, they were filled to overflowing.

To “set our minds on things above not on earthly things,” means not to become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good; it means to become so heavenly minded that we can be earthly good! The risen Jesus has overcome injustice, he has defeated the hopelessness of death, and he knows a thing or two about what makes for the richness of community. On this resurrection day, may we take our yearnings to this risen one, and allow him to show us how to fill them, that we might be earthly good.

