



Sermon Preparatory Notes

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Commentary 1 by Holly Hearon, Workingpreacher.org

The narrative of the empty tomb signifies overturned expectations, hope renewed, and an invitation to participate in God's ongoing narrative through Jesus Christ who is risen.

Within the unfolding story world of the Gospel of Luke, however, the empty tomb is, as yet, an unrecognized sign. The women and other disciples know tombs. They are sites of memory (literally "a sign of remembrance", *mnema*), a way of keeping those who have died physically present in time and space and place. They are also sites of remembering. They evoke stories, another powerful way of keeping those who have died present in our lives.

The women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem had watched as the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross. They watched as Joseph of Arimathea took the body, wrapped it in linen, and placed it in a tomb hewed from rock where no other body had previously been laid. They went home to prepare spices that would be needed to complete the proper burial of the body. (A later document, the *m. Sabb.* 23:5, indicates that this is an activity that was allowed on the Sabbath, although it is unclear whether this applies to the first century.)

The tomb the women approached belonged to the familiar customs and practices that surrounded a death in their community. It was a recognized symbol, a sign of remembrance for the one who had died. It reminds us also of the customs and practices that we associate with death. Such customs and practices provide a visceral way for us to honor the dead and give expression to our grief. They also become a part of our memory and the stories we will recall in association with the one who has died.

As the women approach the tomb in Luke 24:1, they are focused on bringing to completion the burial of Jesus' body and bringing closure to grief. But as they approach, they find the stone covering the entrance to the tomb has been rolled back. And when they enter the tomb, they do not find the body of Jesus. The reality the women expect is not the reality they encounter. The incongruity, says Luke, leaves them perplexed. Not dismayed, angry, or vexed. Perplexed: at a loss to make sense of the disconnection between their expectations and what they find.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels has the women encounter a heavenly being at the tomb. (Note that in Luke, it is the appearance of the heavenly beings that generates “fear” or perhaps “awe” in the women, not the empty tomb). In Matthew, it is an angel (accompanied by an earthquake); in Mark a young man clothed in white; and in Luke, it is two male figures in dazzling robes (the cosmic effect used also at Jesus’ transfiguration in Luke 9:29). In comparing these three narratives, what is most striking is the differences in what is said by the heavenly being(s).

In Matthew and Mark, the heavenly being addresses the women with very nearly the same words: “do not be afraid; you seek Jesus who was crucified ... he has risen.” This is followed by a command to the women to go to the disciples and to tell them to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus (Matthew 28:5-7; Mark 16:6-7). In Luke, the two heavenly figures ask the women a question “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.” Then, “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.”

The question, “**why do you seek the living among the dead?**” draws attention to the **incongruity** between the women’s **expectations and their experience**. They came to the tomb expecting to find the dead, because that is the function of tombs: to house the dead. What they discover is that the “tomb” is now an empty tomb. It is a familiar sign transformed by resurrection.

Nonetheless, the now empty tomb continues to function as a place that evokes memories. And this is precisely what the heavenly beings invite the women to do: to remember “how he told you.” Twice, while Jesus was in Galilee, he had told the disciples that the Son of Man would undergo suffering (Luke 9:22 and 9:44; see also 18:31-34). The words spoken by the heavenly being are not a direct quote of either verse and introduce new language: “handed over to sinners.” This new language brings to the fore a theme that runs throughout the Gospel (see 5:8; 7:37, 39; 13:2; 15:7,10; 18:13).

Another ‘theme’ in the Gospel of Luke is that characters don’t understand until they have things explained to them (see 18:34, where understanding is “hidden”). So the fact that the women do not at first remember what Jesus has told them does not show weakness of character; it reveals a pattern in which understanding comes through proclamation. Hearing the words of the heavenly beings, the women do remember (24:8). And, of their own initiative, they immediately seek out the disciples to, in turn, proclaim to them what they have seen and heard.

But the disciples don’t believe them, nor do they remember. Peter is curious enough to go to the tomb, where he sees the linen clothes but no body, and he returns home “amazed” (24:12); yet he does not vindicate the women. In this particular moment in time, this poses important questions for us: whom do we believe and why? Or why not? Within the community of faith, are we prepared to be perplexed (not angry or vexed) when our expectations are not matched by reality? Are we prepared

to have traditional symbols transformed? What memories do we recall so that we learn to seek the living rather than the dead?

Commentary 2 by Craig R. Koester, Workingpreacher.org

Preaching at Easter has its unique challenges and opportunities.

A typical Easter worship service is often a bit chaotic. Family members who have been away may be home for the holiday. People who rarely worship may come to church for the sake of tradition. The Easter story itself may seem all too familiar, yet those who try to preach it may wonder how anyone could possibly believe it. This challenge is precisely the opportunity. No preacher can make a listener believe that the dead rise. But God can and does work through the Easter message to evoke Easter faith.

The account that is given in Luke 24:1-12 lends itself to a sermon in four steps.

1. The story begins with the obvious: Jesus is dead, and his followers assume that he remains dead (24:1-3). The women come to the tomb because that is where they saw the body of Jesus was placed after his crucifixion (23:55-56). They bring the spices along to anoint the body of Jesus, to show proper respect for the dead. The discovery of the empty tomb does not lead to an easy change of

perspective. It brings confusion, not clarity. Bodies that are dead presumably remain dead. The best one can do is to treat them with respect.

Many modern readers of the gospel might be content to do the same. We, too, assume that death is death, and that our proper response should be to enshrine the dead Jesus in the tomb of memory. We might recall that he was an insightful teacher, a fiery prophet, and a compassionate healer. But he died. So we imagine ourselves called to hallow his memory with praise for his legacy, much as the women imagined themselves called to honor his dead body with spices and ointments. One would think that would be enough.

2. The women receive a word that runs counter to what they know to be true. "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (24:5). One might be tempted to linger over the description of these angelic messengers, but they are not the point. The focus in this section is on the message, not the messengers (24:4-7). What is most striking is that the women encounter the resurrection through this message. They are *told* that Jesus has risen, but they do not see the risen Jesus himself. What they have is a word, a message.

This brings the Easter experience uncomfortably close, because this is precisely what we have--the word of resurrection. One would think God would work differently. It would seem so much easier to have the women come to the tomb and watch Jesus walk out into the light of a new

day. And it would seem much easier for Jesus simply to appear in dazzling glory to us, who gather on an Easter morning generations later. And this is precisely where our situation is like that of the women on the first Easter: we are all given a message of resurrection, which flies in the face of what we know to be true.

3. The only logical response to such a message is unbelief. Experience teaches that death wins. The Easter message says that Jesus lives. When such contradictory claims collide, it only makes sense to continue affirming what we already know. This is what Luke reports in the next section (24:8-11). The women bring the message of resurrection to the others, and they respond as thinking people regularly respond: they thought that the message was "an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (24:11).

Unbelief does not mean that people believe nothing. Rather, it means that they believe something else. People say "I don't believe it" because there is something else that they believe more strongly. Yet here is where the Easter message begins its work, by challenging our certainties. Experience teaches that death wins and that even the strongest succumb to it. Experience teaches that life is what you make it, so get what you can while you can because it will be over soon enough. And the Easter message says, "Really? How can you be so sure?" Death is real, but it is not final. In Jesus, life gets the last word.

4. The Easter message calls you from your old belief in death to a new belief in life. The claim that the tomb could not hold Jesus, and the idea that the one who died by

crucifixion has now risen is so outrageous that it might make you wonder whether it might--just might--be true. The apostles seemed convinced that the message was nonsense, nothing more than "an idle tale" (24:11). Death was death. Yet the message was so outrageous that Peter had to go and take a look for himself (24:12). He had to wonder, "What if it is true?"

Those who gather for worship on Easter Sunday follow in the footsteps of Peter. They have heard the rumor that Jesus is alive and come to hear again for themselves: "What if it is true? What if death is real, but not final? What if Jesus is not merely past but present? What if Jesus were to meet me here? What would life be then?"

The Easter reading stops with Peter's amazement, but the Easter story continues far beyond, as God continues to challenge the certainty of death with the promise of life. Go ahead and tell God that you think it is outrageous to expect anyone to believe that Jesus has risen. Go ahead and tell God that you believe that death gets the final word. None of this is news to God. He has heard it all before. He simply refuses to believe it. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" God wonders. "Through the living Jesus I give you the gift of life. Why would you think that I would offer you anything less?"