

Then, Always, and Now

Luke 24: 36-49

**First Presbyterian Church
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One of the guys in my Bible study started a question this way. “I’m sure you’ve had a lot of doubts to work through because of what you do.” Now that’s astute! Lots of people think that because I’m a pastor, I don’t ever have doubts about whether these stories, this book, this theology is true. I just believe it. But this guy recognized the truth. Precisely because I am a pastor, I routinely question our faith. I regularly wonder, “What if I’m just making this up?” When I meet with our high school seniors, I always tell them. “Stay in touch. Look, if you encounter doubts about Christianity, don’t worry, I’ve had deeper doubts. Talk to me. If you have hard questions, don’t worry, I’ve asked myself harder ones. Dark thoughts are my job.”

So let’s ask a question about what happened on the first Easter. What if Jesus didn’t actually rise from the dead? What does it matter? What does it matter to *right now* what happened back *then*?

And let’s get some help for this conversation. Let’s talk to Pulitzer Prize winning author John Updike. He ran in literary circles known for their fashionable atheism. There’s no way anyone would describe Updike as an evangelical. He questioned and he doubted. He exposed hypocrisy. But Updike could never quite shake his belief in God. As he said in an interview, “Ultimately, I could never take the leap of *nonfaith*.”

In particular, he wrote a poem about what’s at stake in a literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I’d like to read you a bit of it.

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled

eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.¹

Updike got it. Without a real resurrection, we've got nothing. I'd rather be a pagan living for myself than treat the resurrection of Jesus as a sweet parable of how winter turns to spring and the earth is renewed. Please. Or a fantasy the disciples told each other in their grief. That because Jesus lived on in their memories, they felt like he was still alive. Please. No one goes to a horrible death based on a fuzzy feeling. No one begins fearlessly telling the world that Jesus is risen if they know it's just a fond wish. The church has always proclaimed with crazy confidence: our guy got up.

I love the account we read in Luke today. See my hands. See my feet. Touch me. A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have. And by the way, you got anything to eat? Yes, broiled fish sounds great. I'm starving. It's really me. Really alive again.

Updike the skeptic knew that the rate of people rising from the dead was exactly the same in the first century as in the 20th: zero. But for all his questions, he calls us to man up and take the leap of faith. "Let us not mock God...let us walk through the door."

I routinely question if all this could possibly be true. Then, I walk back through the plausibility. The fact that no enemies of Christ ever produced a body to end this news of Easter assures me. The fact of the Christian church existing with an unbroken witness to Christ's rising encourages me. What happened then, happened. *Let us walk through the door.* Of course I question. Often. But I also believe. With all my heart. Dead Jesus lives again.

That was then, but what about our future? What does the rising of Jesus have to do with all this dying we see? As far back as I can remember, I have been pierced by the passing of time. Things end. Years turn. Pets die. People die. It all runs away. Love and life are forever slipping through our hands. Where does the time go? Is it all just flowing over a cliff into nothingness? Or is there a future where what is lost is restored? Is there a time when what has gone is retrieved? Is this it or is this more? The resurrection of Jesus that truly occurred once in history seems to have everything to do with our *future*.

So let's have another conversation. Let's talk with J.R.R. Tolkien. He was an unashamed Christian. He lived through the anxiety and horror of two world wars. He watched what is beautiful get destroyed by violence. He felt keenly the constant passing of what is good into death. And yet he had a most magnificent hope.

Since my mid-twenties, I have loved the story Tolkien placed in the Appendix to his epic, *The Lord of the Rings*. He tells the back story of the relationship between Aragorn, the man who would be king, and Arwen, the elven woman he loved. In my twenties, even as I married the love of my life, I knew that one day we will know the grief of parting. Soon, amidst the wonder of having young children, I felt how precarious and fragile is all life in the world. We could be parted any moment. So through the years, I have read this story often. I cry every time.

As the story concludes, Aragorn, the High King of Middle Earth has ruled for more than a hundred years. He reached the end of his days. King Aragorn lay down on the long bed where he would breathe his last. He called his wife, the Lady Arwen, to his side. She was of Elven blood, and so not mortal as Aragorn. She would be left alive and alone when he closed his eyes.

The King said to her at their parting, "I speak no comfort to you, for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world. . .But let us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. *In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!*"² With that the King passed from this earth.

The fact that we will lose those we love always presses against us. There is no comfort in this world to take away the reality of that pain. But Tolkien expressed a deeper hope, based on resurrection, through the words of Aragorn:

“Yet behold, we are not bound forever to the circles of this world.” Beyond them is more, much more. The future is not emptiness. Jesus is risen, and the dark future now shimmers with the light of eternal life. We will see each other again. What is lost will be restored. As Jesus declares, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21: 7).

Once, back then, Jesus rose. Ahead, the risen Jesus will greet us on the other side of death. In Christ, we will live again. Then. Always. What about *now*? What difference does the resurrection makes to us in the present day? Again, I struggle in this area. Because sometimes it just doesn’t move me like it should. I feel detached from the impact of resurrection in these moments. I don’t know how to access its power.

So let’s talk to another author. Charles Dickens placed resurrection at the heart of his famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. The phrase “Recalled to Life” began just as a mysterious message at the story’s start. But by the end of the novel, “Recalled to Life” was the major theme. Dr. Alexandre Manette got recalled to life when he was released after 18 years from a French prison. But even more importantly Dr. Manette was recalled to life as the loving, constant care of his daughter restored him to sanity. And “Recalled to Life” described the redemption of self-centered Sydney Carton. Carton traded places with a man in line for the guillotine. He went to his own death so that the woman he loved could have her husband returned. For Dickens, resurrection occurs now, in the present day, through *the power of love*. Long, slow patient love. Dramatic, heroic love. We love and create new hope, new life in others. We love and discover that new life is created in us.

Yes, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead gives us hope for the life to come. That hope flows into our present lives. What happened to Jesus in the past has opened the future for those who trust in him. And so, every day, the power of Christ’s rising hope flows into each present moment.

Scripture describes this present power of resurrection now in many ways.

- Peter says, “We have been born again into a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Peter 1: 3). Christ’s rising lights up even the most difficult moments with the hope that in the end life wins, justice triumphs and the earth will be remade. That light gives us confidence to go on even through dark, difficult days.

- Paul connects us to the resurrection when he writes, “Christ was raised from the dead... [so that] we too might walk in *newness of life*” (Rom. 6: 4). Jesus rose in new life. When we are joined to him, everything in our lives is made new again. Staleness becomes fresh. Brittle bitterness becomes supple forgiveness. Cynicism gives way to joy.
- And then Paul describes how our very motivation for life changes with the resurrection: [Christ] died for all, that those who live might *no longer live for themselves but for him* who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5: 16). The resurrection raises us out of being stuck in ourselves. Easter lifts us out of the pit of living with ourselves as the center. Christ fills us with purpose. We live for the one who died and rose and lives for us. We get in step with his redeeming purposes for the world.

I love seeing the power of resurrection at work among you. Not so much in flashy miracles. But in the power of life transformation. I see members of our church going deep with Christ and experiencing how he redeems their past. He goes back with them to the days of sorrow. He shows them how he wept over his friend Lazarus who died. How he grieved with the widow who had lost her only son. And Jesus wipes tears from their faces as he lives in resurrection glory. He gives them hope that changes every present moment.

Christ goes with them to the fearful hours of shame, when horrible words were said or unspeakable acts committed. And he shows them the shame he took in being betrayed with a kiss. He shows them how he took the blows of rejection, how he was spat upon in spite, how he was mocked, how they raged against him. And they find communion with his shame. They find healing in his wounds. Then, as they see him rise, they find the power of his accepting love. They enter new life.

I talked with a woman on the long journey of healing the rejection and abandonment she experienced as a child. The journey took courage, for she had to gaze into deep wells of sorrow. She had to acknowledge the profound loneliness she had always felt. And such isolation just made her sad. But one day, as she prayed, she visualized the risen Jesus with her. Without trying, she heard him speak. Gently, briefly, he addressed her. “My hope runs deeper than your sadness.” She felt the risen Jesus embrace her. She knew her bones that she was not alone. All this dying, all this leaving, all this loneliness was rising in new life. *My hope runs deeper than your sadness.*

On this Easter morning, there can be no promises made that our trials will magically resolve. It doesn't work that way. The sorrow of our partings, the sadness of being hurt and losing loved ones is part of daily life in this world. It can press so hard against us. We may want to despair. To give in to cynicism and hopelessness. But then the news comes to us again. Jesus is risen. Really, truly risen. Tolkien's words reflect the resurrection: "In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory." More, much more awaits. And more, much more can be mended by the risen Christ than we ever imagined. He tells us, "My hope runs deeper than your sadness." Indeed it does. So, as Updike urges, "Let us walk through the door." Let us make the leap of faith, from despair to hope. Jesus is risen. This changes everything. Then, now and always.

¹ John Updike, "Seven Stanzas at Easter," 1960.

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955), Appendix A.