

RESURRECTION SUNDAY—LUKE 23:50-24:12

Sermon Transcript—21st April 2019. Grange Baptist Church. Luke Jenkin.

||

Never let the truth get in the way of a good story (or so we're told and so we sometimes listen).

Never let the truth get in the way of a good story. When you've got a story to tell and you want it to grab your hearers and leave an impression on them, you can't let the ordinariness of its truth bring it down—you take the bare outline of the story and you colour it in!

I love how the North Korean Kims take this to the extreme. (There aren't too many joys to be taken from the North Korean regime, but we do have this at least!)

Kim Jong Il, for example, claimed to have: scored a perfect 300 in his first ever ten pin bowling game, hit 11 holes in one on the same round of golf, wrote more than 1500 books while at university, and never once used the toilet in his entire lifetime.

Say what we will about the Kims—they never let the truth get in the way of a good story!

And their garishly colourful tales about themselves are intended to grab and impress, (and in a scarily controlled environment like North Korea they may work), but outside of that, their stories are outrageously unbelievable.

||

(Well) for many, the claim that Jesus bodily rose from the dead is equally outrageous and you might expect its accompanying story to be equally colourful... But is it?... What did you make of Luke's account of Jesus' resurrection we just read?... Did it sound outrageous?... What about the details of the story?—too colourful to be believed?...

||

In our passage this morning the events of that fearful Friday just gone are over and so is Jesus. This is it—he's done and he's dead. His followers who hadn't already bailed out knew this painfully. Have a look at verse 49 (the sentence just before our passage begins),

...all those who knew him, including the women who'd followed him from Galilee (right back where Jesus' ministry began), stood at a distance... watching these things (helplessly watching their beloved Rabbi be killed by crucifixion)...

And his body is left to hang lifeless on a humiliating cross, and that's where it will stay to become a slowly pecked away at reminder that he's a fraud and a failure. This really is it—Jesus' very public execution is over. He's dead and everybody knows it.

II

But... Luke's account continues!... though not with his deserting disciples making a colourful and courageous return to demand his body for an honourable burial, but it continues with an unlikely undertaker. We see that in verses 50 through 54,

⁵⁰ Now... there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God. ⁵² Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. ⁵⁴ It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

Before we get to the claim about Jesus' resurrection we should first ask how his body ever got in a tomb at all. Though he was sinless and innocent, he was crucified as a criminal and crucified criminals don't get nice burials.

But up pops Joseph of Woop Woop—which is about right because still no one's too sure where Arimathea even is) and he comes out of nowhere in Luke's story, and he (just) happens to be a member of the Council who orchestrated Jesus' death but (Luke tells us) he opposed them in that...

and he was waiting for the kingdom of God.

II

Jesus is a corpse—he's no longer personally active in the story and his disappeared disciples aren't with us right now. But God has his man who's waiting for his kingdom, in the right place, at the right time and this shouldn't surprise us—God's always worked through his people like this, just like back at the very start of Luke's Gospel with:

Zechariah and Elizabeth,

Both (of whom) were upright in the sight of God (Luke chapter 1).

And Simeon,

Righteous and devout waiting for the consolation of Israel (Luke chapter 2).

So Jesus' burial is left to God's unlikely undertaker, Joseph of Arimathea, who's right there in the very Council that called for Jesus' death, who has the ear of Pilate the Roman governor who has authority

over Jesus' dead body. It's not exactly a good look for the disciples who are all cowering at a distance.

II

There are more unflattering details in the story with the women from Galilee as well—let's call them the embarrassed embalmers. To their credit, they're the last ones standing. Have a look from verse 55,

⁵⁵ The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. ⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes (these are to embalm Jesus' dead body with). But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

They ran out of time because the Sabbath day of rest was about to begin (verse 54) so they have to wait, and (verse 1),

¹ On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they'd prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone (the stone that sealed the entrance to the tomb) rolled away from the tomb ³ but when they entered... they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus.

We must realise this—the women's discovery of the empty tomb was (essentially) an accident—they didn't so much as discover the empty tomb as they stumbled across it!

So let's not imagine that Mary shot Joanna a text early that Sunday morning: "Hey Jo, Mary here. I reckon he should be up by now, should we take him some breakfast?" No! They didn't come here ready to meet with a risen anybody—they came here in sorrow, spices and perfume in hand, ready to embalm a dead body. But all that's about to change!

II

Having never joined the Jedi myself, it was news to me that Star Wars fans were apparently furious when, in the last movie, Luke Skywalker died. But since releasing the preview for the next instalment in the franchise, hope is reportedly building just based on its title: 'Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker'... Could it be?!...

II

(Well) back in reality, as these women stand in an empty tomb of confusion holding their 'dead person skin treatment' kit, hope is about to be restored to these embarrassed embalmers!—God is about to fill in the huge blank in this empty tomb through his angelic messengers.

Just, so you know, by the way, in the Bible there are no flying chubby babies who do archery. The word 'angel' (or 'angelos' in ancient Greek) just means 'messenger.' If there were flying chubby

babies here we should talk about that—if Keya and Mabel ever come fluttering in here, bows drawn, ready to fire arrows at us we definitely need to talk about that! But this isn't anything like that!—these are messengers, sent from God (described plainly as men in heavenly clothes) and it's their message that matters. So let's listen in again from verse 4,

⁴While they were wondering about this (the empty tomb), suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶He isn't here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." ⁸Then they remembered his words.

And we can read those words of Jesus back in Luke chapter 9 when, in Galilee, he'd said,

"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Though he'd spoken about it plainly enough it was so far removed from everyone's expectations that no one really got what Jesus was on about until now, and who's here to testify to its truth?

women who've only stumbled upon his empty tomb!

II

There's a really inconvenient truth in this—the fact that the first eyewitnesses were female is far from ideal. The thinking of the day (wrong as it was) is reflected by a historian of the time called Josephus. He wrote (and I quote):

But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex.

If you were making up a resurrection story at this time, you just wouldn't cast women as your embarrassed embalmers and first eyewitnesses at the empty tomb.

II

As we keep reading, though, we realise this isn't just an account about embarrassed embalmers—much more embarrassing than that is going down in history as the first report rejecters! The women come bearing the report of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and we might hope that the other disciples take them at their word, immediately remember Jesus' words and break out in rejoicing together as they go to find him... but no. (But that's the more colourful story we might expect if Luke were making this up). Instead, we get to say 'hello' to the first unbelievers!

There they are—the report rejecters—in verses 9 through 12,

⁹When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But they didn't believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹²Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself (or 'marvelling to himself' is a better translation) what had happened.

I admit, I haven't ever sat down and really planned it out, but if I were going to (somehow) sneak into a tomb under Roman guard, steal a dead body and stage a bogus resurrection I don't think I'd go to the trouble of unwinding the linen burial strips and leave them behind.

And also, if I were concocting a resurrection story to get a movement up and running, I wouldn't have the founding fathers (the apostles) on that resurrection morn, hearing the report of Jesus' resurrection and telling the women they've lost their minds!

The central event in God's salvation has occurred on this morning—Jesus of Nazareth was really dead and now he's really risen again!—a bit more impressiveness and colour wouldn't hurt!

But instead, among those who stand to lose the most by this story not being accepted as true there's an unlikely undertaker, some embarrassed embalmers, and even those who outright reject the report that it's true. It's (just) all so plainly honest and scandalously matter of fact.

So if you're considering this claim and thinking, 'I'm having a hard time accepting Jesus rose from the dead,' Jesus' close disciples, including Peter, are actually in full agreement with you! They're yelling at you through this ancient account and they're saying, 'We get it!...but it's true!'

II

In his last public appearance before his death the brilliant writer (and my favourite atheist), Christopher Hitchens, gave this advice,

In the meantime we have the same job we always had—to say as thinking people and as humans that there are no final solutions, there is no absolute truth, there is no supreme leader, there is no totalitarian solution that says if you will just give up your freedom of inquiry, if you will simply abandon your critical faculties, a world of idiotic bliss can be yours.

I gather that lots of people think about Christianity that way—if you want to believe in Jesus Christ risen from the dead just switch your brain off and live by blind faith in this outrageously colourful story. Except, that isn't it at all and Christianity has always pushed back against this false claim that we're asking people to sacrifice reason on the altar of faith.

In fact, our own book invites scrutiny from skeptics and threatens to throw us under the bus in the event we're proven wrong. If Jesus of Nazareth has not been raised from the dead, then our faith is useless, we're stuck in our sins, death will have the last say over us, and Christopher Hitchens was

right in pitying us for holding on for dear life to such a pathetic hope, and *that's* in the *Bible!* (You can read it in 1 Corinthians 15).

Contrary to popular belief, the Bible won't allow us to treat it as a book full of fables for people out of touch with reality who need ancient myths to get through their modern lives. It's a book for the real world, full of historical claims.

That's especially clear at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel where he insists his story belongs in the non-fiction, historical reference section of the library, not on the self-help shelf with Oprah. Here's how Luke opens his story,

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you've been taught...

Maybe you're seeing that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead isn't presented an outrageously colourful tale for outrageously idiotic fools but that it's a surprisingly honest account recorded by a meticulous historian.

I hope you will see, too, that it matters immensely what we do with it.

II

Notice how this passage God is speaking to us through is a story clouded by complete bewilderment, but which has (at it's heart) complete fulfilment. If we can't get past the bewilderment and so fail to get the fulfilment, we get this event wrong and we get the whole Gospel wrong.

Back in Luke chapter 18 Jesus explained to his disciples again,

"We're going up to Jerusalem, and everything that's written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He'll be handed over to the Gentiles. They'll mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he'll rise again." The disciples didn't understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they didn't know what he was talking about.

On this resurrection Sunday we're not supposed to go home still not knowing what he was talking about—we're supposed to get it!

For centuries past, prophets like Isaiah had been holding out this hope that God himself would rescue broken and sinful humanity through a suffering and living servant, (like we read earlier in the service from Isaiah 53),

He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering...

By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the sins of my people he was stricken...

He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death...

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand...

After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied

And Jesus rises from the dead and says, 'Fulfilled!'—he is the suffering servant who has died for our sins and rose again for our salvation! And, now, all those who (like Peter) look into this marvellous reality and put their trust in the truly risen Jesus, share in his true, resurrection life, truly free from sin and death! It's as Peter says, himself,

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!

||

Friend, where are you looking for meaning and hope in life and death?... Within yourself?... In the temporal things of this world?...

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?... He isn't here—he has risen!"

LUKE 23:50-24:12—FURTHER STUDY NOTES

LUKE 23:50-56—THE UNLIKELY UNDERTAKER

The disciples have bailed and stand at a distance, but God will see to it that his Chosen One is placed in a tomb. Joseph of Woop Woop (Arimathea), who was waiting for the kingdom of God, appears out of nowhere to arrange Jesus' burial. But notice that God has worked in this way before (see Luke 1:5-7, 2:22-25). God has his people in place and works his purposes through them! How encouraging is that?!

LUKE 24:1-8—THE EMBARRASSED EMBALMERS

Some of the female followers have stuck it out and they arrive on Sunday morning with spices and perfume in hand ready to embalm Jesus' dead body only to find an empty tomb. The angelic messengers fill them in—he isn't here; he is risen!—and remind them of his words back in Galilee (see Luke 9:21-22). Notice again that God has worked in this way before (see Luke 1:8-20, 1:26-38 & 2:8-16 and note the importance placed on how the angelic message is received). These disciples paid careful attention to God's Word (see Luke 23:55-56) and now learn the concrete reliability of Jesus' words. (And from God's angelic messengers no less! See Luke 24:6 & 8). Consider this glorious reality: Jesus keeps his word! What promises of Jesus do you struggle to hope in?

LUKE 24:9-12—THE REPORT REJECTERS

Again, the story revolves around words and how they're received. The women come bearing the good news and the apostles dismiss them as talking nonsense but Peter is intrigued. Many hear the claim "Jesus is risen from the dead" and are understandably dismissive but some are intrigued. How might we respond to them in the spirit of Luke 24:1-12? Pray that we would have excitement in bringing this awesome but true report to those in our lives.