



## **EASTER**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, April 12, 2009**

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**Lection - Luke 24:1-9** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. (v. 2) They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, (v. 3) but when they went in, they did not find the body. (v. 4) While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. (v. 5) The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. (v. 6) Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, (v. 7) that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” (v. 8) Then they remembered his words, (v. 9) and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Easter is the highest holy day on the Christian Church calendar. In spite of the extremes to which some have gone to make it a commercialized occasion of new suits, new shoes and new hats, the good news of the Resurrection of Christ still pushes through. For his followers, when Christ was crucified, so much of the vision for a better day and a brighter tomorrow died on the cross with him. When he was crucified, so many of their dreams for the future of their children died on the cross with him. When he was crucified, so many of their beliefs about the justice of God and the triumph of right over wrong and good over evil hung in limbo. Easter is the response to hopes that have been dashed and an answer to prayers. As a people who have had so much crucified, we celebrate with vigor that we are yet alive and that our Savior lives forever more.

#### **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 24:1-9**

##### **Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

In my twenty-five years as a pastor of the church where I currently serve, I have heard and preached many Easter sermons. Likewise, I have watched so many persons endure the harsh realities of life. It has often been my prayer for many that they have “an anchor that grips and holds a solid rock,” not just for Easter Sundays filled with frocks and bonnets, but for every day. My earnest desire is that more and more people know true resurrection—resurrection from dreary living, resurrection from tormented relationships, resurrection from government policies that are hostile to the poor, resurrection, indeed.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The women in our text were in need of resurrection too. They were brokenhearted, confused and their spirits were in turmoil. They were still reeling and rocking from the events that had taken place several days earlier. Their time with Jesus seemed all too brief. Not only did it end much too soon, but it ended in a way for which none of them were prepared. While it was true that they had heard him refer to his death at various times, none of them expected things to come crashing down the way they did.

At the beginning of the week, when he had entered Jerusalem, the whole town had been moved by his presence. People stripped palms from the trees and threw down their cloaks to cushion the steps of the donkey upon which he rode. They rejoiced greatly as they sang glad hosannas to his name. They gave so much praise that some of the religious leaders wanted him to quiet the crowd. However, he had told them that if those who were giving praise were to hold their peace the very rocks would cry out the message of thanksgiving for the presence that was in their midst.

Just the previous Sunday, one week to the day, these women had come for Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Now they are draped in their garments of mourning, and with tear stained eyes, and trembling hands they carry bottles of ointment to anoint his dead body. They have come in the dark to the tomb where they expected to find his dead, cold and partially decayed body. It was hard to believe, and yet it was true. Jesus Christ had been crucified!

As they got nearer the tomb in silence, and in the stillness of the half dark, half light, early morning hour that was occasionally pierced by a sniffle or muffled cries that came from various members of their number, they began to ask a question that became increasingly important as they approached the place where they assumed the Lord lay. That question was, “Who will roll the stone away?” However, as they neared the tomb, they were startled when two men in dazzling garments appeared suddenly beside them. Instantly, their grief was turned into terror as they bowed before them not knowing what to expect. The men asked them a question that was as startling as their sudden appearance. They asked them why they were looking for the living among the dead. The Lord was not in the tomb, because he had risen just as he had said while he was in Galilee. He had told them that he would be handed over to sinners, crucified, and then rise again on the third day. They now remembered his words.

I wonder sometimes how much of our grief, fear, and doubt is due to the fact that we forget the Word of the Lord? These women, who had come to the tomb with low expectations, returned to the disciples and other believers with the most important message that has ever been spoken, “The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!” They left the tomb with much more than they expected.

Among the many enduring lessons of Easter, one of the most powerful is this—when the Word of God is fulfilled in our lives, it is always better than we expected. That is good news, because often our expectations fall far short of what we had visualized and prepared for. Many times, the product we purchased or acquired is far less than what was advertised. It is not as large or shiny, we don’t look as good in it as we expected, or it doesn’t serve us as we had hoped. The real person that we get to know or that we end up with is often far less than the ideal we had imagined. Many of us have been disappointed so much that we sometimes cushion ourselves so that we won’t be so let down when things don’t measure up to our expectations. We have adopted the philosophy that says, “Hope for the best, and expect the worst.” The problem is that frequently our emphasis is on the latter portion of that philosophy rather than the first part. We tend to adopt an “expect the worst” attitude towards people and life that leads to cynicism and a negative spirit, especially during bad times.

The message of Easter—that with God we can receive better than we expect—gives us something we so desperately need; something and someone to believe in. We’ve become so pessimistic and overly cautious, because so much we believe in disappoints us. When we get too close to our heroes and heroines we discover that they have Achilles’ heels and clay feet. When we get too close to movements and institutions we discover their systemic weaknesses and flaws.

However, Easter comes to restore trust and credibility to faith that has been disappointed. It restores love that stands on the edge of disillusionment. It does all of this because the fulfillment of God’s promises is always better than we expect. Those who dare to trust the true and living God completely, who follow where Jesus leads, and who are open to the Holy Spirit without reservation, always receive more than expected.

When the Prodigal Son left the hog pen, the most he hoped for was to be received in his father’s home as a servant. Instead, he received restoration in his father’s open arms. He received much more than he expected.

When the early church gathered in the Upper Room, they expected to receive the promise of the Father, but had no idea what it was. They received the infilling of the presence of God, individual tongues of fire, and the anointing to speak in other languages. They received much more than they expected.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. expected to become a big steeple church pastor or educator. He never expected to be a Nobel Peace Prize winner. He never expected to be the twentieth century prophet of social justice. He never expected to have a national holiday named after him. Since he dared to do God’s will, because he trusted the Word of God,

even though he died young, he still received much more and went much farther than he ever expected.

What do we expect when we go to church on Easter? Do we expect to simply hear an old story, see old friends and sing old songs? Like the women who came to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning, we can receive so much more than we expect. We can receive the resurrected, ascended, exalted, and reigning Jesus and soon coming King as our personal Lord and Savior. We can receive the reality of salvation and deliverance. We can receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit and new power for living. We can receive joy unspeakable and full of glory.

### **Celebration**

The news of the risen Christ is better than we expect. However, I have better news than the proclamation of his rising some two thousand years ago. The better news is this: Jesus rose to die no more. The best news is this: Jesus Christ still lives and he reigns forever and ever as King of kings and Lord of Lords, Hallelujah! Amen!

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include:

**Sights:** Early dawn, an empty tomb, spices that the women carried, a rolled away stone, two men in dazzling clothes, the faces of terrified women, bowing women;

**Sounds:** Women walking, the sounds of morning animals, such as birds; and

**Textures:** The graininess of the spices, the rough stone, the dirt and straw textured tomb and the material of which the dazzling clothes were made.

### **III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions**

- Better Than We Expect is a possible sermon title.
- More than We Expect for Easter is another possible title.