

### ***Open Tomb, Closed Minds***

In the name of the risen Lord Jesus, dear friends in Christ: In this joyous season of Easter, the Church on earth celebrates and proclaims what are the central and foundational truths of our faith; namely the suffering and death for sin and the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus. To that end two weeks ago on Easter Day, we focused on the *fact* of Jesus' resurrection – that he really did rise from the dead. It's a verifiable historical event. Then last week, we considered the implications of Jesus' resurrection: what his rising from the dead means for you and for me. We saw that with his victory over sin and death comes the declaration of peace between the holy God and sinful humans. The war of man's rebellion is over. God fixed it; fixed it by sending Jesus to pay the just penalty of our sin so that righteousness is reckoned to all who trust in him. And because Jesus lives, we too will live in him forever.

This morning I'd like to shift gears a bit and engage in some apologetics; that is, a defense of this central tenet of our faith. On one hand there are critics, people who deny Jesus' resurrection claiming that it never happened on supposedly intellectual and scientific grounds. They say, "Well, you know how silly and superstitious people were in the ancient world. Why, they'd believe anything. So, somebody came along saying Jesus rose from the dead and the fools who had followed him were only too happy to believe it. But no one with half a brain accepts it as truth today."

On the other hand, we have self-proclaimed "Christians" on the liberal side of the aisle who also deny Jesus' resurrection. For them Christianity is not about Jesus redeeming the lost world by his death and resurrection but rather a system of morality that teaches in the words of their favorite hymn "Come on people now. Smile on your brother. Everybody get together. Try to love one another, right now." According to them Jesus is not the world's Savior in the sense that we can expect some kind of afterlife in a recreated earthly Paradise. He isn't God in flesh. He never performed any miracles because miracles don't happen. And he certainly didn't rise from the dead because dead is dead and that's all she wrote. No, he is the world's Savior in the sense that his insightful moral teachings help us to "save" ourselves by living in the here and now a life of love and acceptance for all. His disciples understood that. But you see, he made such a profound impact on them that after his death they began to speak about him *as if* he were still alive. Since (apparently) they lacked the vocabulary to say "he's dead but we still think about him a lot", saying that he rose from the dead was how they expressed his ongoing influence, how the spirit of his teaching lived on among them. Unfortunately it happened over the years that this way of talking began to be understood literally so that generations later unsophisticated, fundamentalist Christians started claiming that Jesus really did rise from the dead in his body. Somehow the idea stuck. Good thing we know better now, can set the record straight, and return Christianity to what it was really all about in the first place. And I wish I were making this up, but I'm not. Some version of this is taught at all the liberal mainline seminaries.

The thing to note, however, is that both of these approaches to denying the resurrection of Jesus are completely debunked by the simple and straightforward texts of Holy Scripture. Far from being superstitious and willing to believe anything, the biblical accounts stress how hard it was for the disciples to apprehend the truth that Jesus had risen from the dead. Though he told them on at least three different occasions that he was going to Jerusalem where he would be arrested, condemned, crucified, killed, and buried, *and* that he would rise again from the dead on the third day, they did not believe it. They absolutely refused to. So when the

events began to happen as Jesus had foretold, they were completely unprepared. And when he died they lost all hope in him. Not one of them remembered his promise to rise again. Even if they had remembered, they wouldn't have believed it.

So it was early on the first Easter morning that the women went to the tomb carrying spices. They intended to finish properly the rushed burial performed by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea late on Friday. And as they went, they wondered who would roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb to give them access. Upon arrival, they discover the tomb already open. Their initial response is horror. Resurrection is the last thing on their minds. The tomb is open, but their minds are closed. They assume instead that someone has stolen the body. That, or maybe defiled it and left the tomb open so that all manner of vermin could get at it. Bracing themselves for the worst, they peer into the tomb and find two angels sitting where the body had been laid. The angels berate them: "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He's not here. He's risen; just like he told you. Go tell his disciples that he goes before you into Galilee. There you will see him."

We're told that at this the women did indeed remember Jesus' promise to rise; but they still don't believe it. Mary Magdalene goes to find Peter and John. And what does she tell them? Not what the angels said, but rather that someone had taken the body of Jesus away. Peter and John run to the tomb and find it open. They see the grave clothes neatly folded lying to one side. And they walk away wondering what happened to the body. They have no notion that Jesus might be alive.

Mary returns to the empty tomb and stands there weeping. Jesus walks up behind her and asks why she's crying. She thinks he's the gardener. Maybe he took the body. (I suppose you could say he did.) She says, "Sir, if you've taken his body, show me where. I'll take charge of it." Jesus says, "Mary, it's me." Astonishment. Wonder. Overwhelming joy. When finally she stops clinging to him, she goes to report to the others that she has seen the risen Lord. And they think she's completely lost her mind.

That afternoon the two Emmaus disciples head out. Jesus joins them on the road, but they don't recognize him. He asks them why they seem so sad and troubled. "What? Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know what things have happened here in the last few days?" "What things? Tell me."

They do, the whole story: about Jesus of Nazareth, a great teacher and prophet of God who performed many mighty miracles. We thought we was the one who would redeem Israel. But the chief priests and rulers had him arrested and condemned. He was crucified. Now he's dead. That was three days ago. But there's more: early this morning some of the women went to the tomb to anoint his body. They came back saying the body was gone and that they had a vision of angels who said he was alive. Can you believe that nonsense?

As a matter of fact, he can. Jesus takes them to task: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. They hang on his every word. Their hearts glow with warmth as he speaks. By the time they get to Emmaus, they are convinced. They invite this stranger in so that they can hear more. At supper, for a brief moment, he reveals himself to them in the breaking of the bread. And then he vanishes from their sight. It dawns on them what has happened – how they spent the whole afternoon with the

risen Lord Jesus and didn't know it. They get up at once and run back to Jerusalem with the good news.

They arrive out of breath. They gain admission to the locked room where the disciples are hiding out for fear of the Jews. They recount exactly what happened on the way: their journey with Jesus, his explanation of the Scriptures, and how he was revealed to them in the breaking of the bread.

It's precisely there that today's Gospel begins. Jesus suddenly appears in their midst and says, "Peace to you!" And here's what's so amazing: at this point there are four eyewitnesses, four people in the room who have seen and spoken with the risen Lord Jesus. Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the two Emmaus disciples have all given their testimony that Jesus is alive. And yet, when he appears, they are all terrified. They think they're seeing a ghost. That's how closed their minds still are to the truth that Jesus has risen from the dead in his body.

He practically has to club them over the head with the truth to get them to believe it. "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet. It's me. Touch me, and see. A spirit does not have flesh and bone as you see that I have."

They do see. They do touch. They carefully examine the scars in his hands and feet. Fear and doubt give way to joy, joy so great that they think it's too good to be true. They begin to doubt their own senses. More proof is required. Jesus asks for something to eat. They give him a piece of fish expecting to see it pass through his spiritual form and fall to the ground when he puts it in his mouth. But no, he chews. He swallows. Picture him opening his mouth showing them it's all gone, and them looking around on the floor for where it might have fallen.

At last they are warming up to the truth. And now that Jesus has their attention, he gets to the main proof of his resurrection. It's not in what they see and touch of his body. It's in the Holy Scriptures – the Word of God that can never be broken. "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their closed minds to understand the Scriptures. He helped them to understand that this is what they have all been about from the very beginning, the constant storyline that the Lord has been revealing from Genesis to Malachi: that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations."

In other words, all of the Scriptures are about the fact of the resurrection of Jesus, and what his resurrection means for you and me. Not a silly superstition that was easy for the disciples to believe. Not a way of saying that the moral teachings of Jesus live on among us. No, it's the simple truth of God by which he is even now opening closed hearts and minds to receive the salvation he has prepared for us in his Son. And now, our minds open to these truths, we are his witnesses to carry this good news to others, that by the Word of Scripture and the work of the Spirit they too may have their minds opened to the truth, with the result that in the end, their tombs will be opened too when together we are raised in our bodies to receive the inheritance God will grant those who live by faith in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. God grant to us and to many more to who we bear witness, in his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***