

April 20, 2025
Luke 24:1-12

Easter Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The End is Now the Beginning”

“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.”

Decoration Day is a tradition practiced in many communities throughout Canada in which people visit cemeteries where their loved ones are buried to tidy gravesites, clean memorials, and place floral tributes. Once a national holiday, Decoration Day is now a tradition practiced at different times throughout the spring in cemeteries and communities across the country. In my family, we celebrated Decoration Day on Memorial Day, the America equivalent of Remembrance Day that is observed on the last Monday in May. We would visit the cemeteries where our family members were buried and bring rakes, hedge clippers, and baskets to pick up the debris that was left from the winter. It was a day for us to honour those who had gone before us by making certain that their graves were well tended and their lives remembered by our presence and the flowers we left behind as a loving tribute to them.

On the Sunday morning after Jesus has died and is buried on the previous Friday, women who were present at his crucifixion visit the tomb where his body was placed after his death. Because Jesus had been buried in the waning hours of Friday as the Sabbath approached, Joseph of Arimathea was not able to complete the burial rites of the Jewish people (*“Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid.”* – Luke 23:53). The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee and witnessed his crucifixion *“saw the tomb and where the body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments”* (23:55-56).

- “In his telling of Jesus’ death, Luke makes a point of highlighting the presence of ‘the women who had followed him from Galilee.’ (23:49). After they see where his body is placed – unwashed, naked, hair unbrushed, simply wrapped in a linen cloth – they make preparations to return after the sabbath to honour his body in death.” – Sean Gladding.

While the intention of the women on that Sunday morning was not exactly the same as those who visit the graves of loved ones on Decoration Day, they also came to the place where Jesus was laid to honour their Lord by giving his body a proper burial

according to Jewish custom. They came to perform one final act of respect at a moment where they assumed the end had arrived, when Jesus was dead and buried, and all the hopes they had in him had also died and were buried in that tomb. The women journey to the tomb at the earliest possible moment after the sabbath: *“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared”* (24:1). The women’s intent was to anoint the body to complete the burial customs that the beginning of the sabbath had precluded them from completing. Luke does not include Mark’s account of the women questioning *“who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”* (Mark 16:3), nor is there any mention of guards who had been stationed at the tomb to assuage the religious authorities’ fear that *“his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead’”* (Matthew 27:54). In Luke When the women arrive at the tomb *“they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body”* (24:2-3). The Evangelist reports both what the women found and what they did not find: they found the stone rolled away, but they did not find the body of Jesus that they had come to anoint. While they are perplexed by this unexpected turn of events, Luke reports that *“suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them”* (24:4). While these figures are not identified as “angels,” such an identity is conveyed by describing their apparel as “dazzling” or “gleaming.” The appearance of the two heavenly figures at the empty tomb in Luke links this scene to the other scenes in this Evangelist’s writings in which two figures appear:

- “Suddenly he saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” – 9:30.
- “While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’” – Acts 1:10-11.

The appearance of these angelic figures follows a pattern like that of the appearances of angels in both the Old Testament and Luke:

- “Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the LORD; and Gideon said, ‘Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.’ But the LORD said to him, ‘Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die.’” – Judges 6:22-23.

- “Then there appeared to [Zechariah] an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.’” – Luke 1:11-13.

The women react to the appearance of these angelic figures in a similar fashion: “*The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground*” (24:5a). but unlike in these other angelic appearances no assurance is given (i.e. “Do not be afraid”). Instead, the heavenly beings proceed to deliver the Easter announcement, which is at the center of the Empty Tomb tradition: “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.*” (24:5b). This mild reprimand is followed by a reminder of what Jesus had told his followers previously about the events that have occurred in the course of the previous three days: “*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*” (24:6). This calls to mind Jesus’ passion predictions, including his words to his disciples that “*the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*” (9:22). The fact that the women “*remembered his words*” (which Jesus would repeat again to his disciples when he tells them to “*let these words sink into your ears: the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands*” – 9:44) places the women in the inner circle of disciples with whom such a prediction had been shared:

- “‘Remember his words,’ the men tell the women. And the women do remember – a memory that testified to their presence in Jesus’ inner circle of disciples. But Jesus’ words are not only remembered; they are reframed in light of the passion and the empty tomb ... Memory is meant to empower God’s new creation, not petrify it.” – Jerusha Matsen Neal.

In Luke, the women are not instructed to go and tell the disciples (“*But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.*” – Mark 16:7); but their remembering compels them to return from the tomb and tell all they had witnessed “*to the eleven and to all the rest*” (24:9; the report of “the eleven” is a reference to the death of Judas Iscariot, who according to Matthew “*went out and hanged himself*” – Matthew 27:5). Luke finally names the women who witnessed the empty tomb and the words of the angels: “*Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.*” (24:10). Both Mary Magdalene and Joanna were listed among the women who followed Jesus in Galilee:

- “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.” – 8:1-3.

The women’s report should have been credible because they were relating events of which they had firsthand experience; there were several witnesses; and their character had been established by the reports of their selfless service to Jesus and his disciples. Nevertheless, the others do not accept their testimony: “*But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them*” (24:11). While this refusal may bear elements of misogyny, they may have doubted such a message no matter who brought it to them, as did Thomas when the other disciples tell him that “*we have seen the Lord,*” to which Thomas responds, “*unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.*” (John 20:25). Luke reports that one of the disciples, Peter, responds to the women’s report by going to the tomb to see for himself: “*But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen clothes by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*” (24:12). What Peter saw confirmed the news that Jesus’ body was not where it was buried; but the empty tomb alone did not lead to Easter faith which will be “*based on post-resurrection appearances – personal encounters with the risen Lord*” (Alan Culpepper).

There is one aspect of Luke’s account of the experience of the empty tomb and the announcement of the angelic beings that “*he is not here but is risen*” – the absence of an appearance of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. This should not be understood as evidence of this Evangelist’s doubts about the Resurrection, for the Easter Gospel in Luke will continue with the account of the travelers who encounter the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus and Jesus’ appearance to his disciples, in which he “*opened their minds to understand the scriptures*” and commissioned them as witnesses, promising that “*I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high*” (24:45, 49). But the fact that the risen Lord does not appear in this Gospel lesson assigned for Easter Sunday should not be confusing to us, because the message of this Gospel is that the lives and purpose of the women who came to the tomb on that first Easter morning has now been completely transformed. What had been an act of decoration, of paying honour and respect to Jesus by giving his body a proper burial, has now become a mission of witness to the empty tomb and the message of the angels of the

resurrection of our Lord. What had begun as a day that would mark the end of Jesus' story is now the beginning of the story of the resurrection of our Lord and the good news that would be shared by the generations of those who were called to witness to the good news that because Christ rose from the dead, those who are baptized into his death and resurrection will also share in this assurance of everlasting life:

- “But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” – 1 Corinthians 15:19-26.

There would be no Christian faith if the women had been able to accomplish their goal when they came to the tomb on that Sunday morning; if they had found the body of Jesus where it had been laid, they could have used the spices and ointments they had prepared to bestow on him the honour and dignity he deserved at his death. After their task was fulfilled, they would leave the body sealed in the tomb, along with the hopes that had accompanied their discipleship as followers of the man from Nazareth. But what had been the end for them is now the beginning, as they become among the first to share the good news of what they had witnessed: that Christ is no longer in the tomb – Christ is risen!

- “The message is clear: No one and nothing is the same after the Resurrection happens. Jesus may have changed after his crucifixion, but the Resurrection changed the rest of the Christian community, as well. Transformation is like that. When one person changes so must everyone else around them. Resurrection changes us as much as it changes Jesus.” – Joan Chittister.

As we move into what will hopefully be more spring-like weather, our thoughts may turn to a Decoration Day when we will visit the graves where our loved ones are buried to tend to them, honour them, and remember the lives we shared with them. While we remember when we first visited these places in which we committed their earthly remains to their place of rest, we also remember the experience of the women who also came to the place where the one they loved has been placed, and how what they assumed was the end became the beginning because of the message that is at the heart of the Gospel that they proclaimed and that men and women proclaim to

this day: that while Jesus was “*crucified, died, and was buried,*” death was not the end, for “*on the third day he rose again.*” As we visit and decorate the graves of our loved ones, we may recall the words spoken on the day of their committal to these places of rest, that it is in “*sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ*” that their earthly remains were committed to this place. What on that day seemed to be the end is in fact the beginning, as we look to that day when our Saviour “*will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also*” (John 14:3). As the tomb of Jesus was not the end for our Lord and Saviour, neither will the place where our remains will rest mark the end for us; for as Christ rose from the dead on that Easter day, the end is the beginning for us because of the good news that “Christ the Lord is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

Amen.