

## “Too Good to Be True?”

Date: April 18, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Easter 3, Year B

Text: Luke 24:36-48

Theme: The meaning of the resurrection for our lives today

Frank’s dream of visiting the Holy Land had finally come true. He had planned this trip carefully and his visit culminated in an Easter Sunday visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This ancient church is revered by many Christians as the traditional site of Jesus’ burial and resurrection.

As Frank waited in a long line of pilgrims, his anticipation and excitement built. His mind wandered back and forth between images of all the sites he had visited over the past week and his current thought of standing in the very place where Jesus is reported to have been buried following his crucifixion. Finally, it was his turn to enter into the sepulcher.

Surprisingly, his initial response was not the anticipated euphoria one might expect. Instead, Frank reported feeling a deep disappointment. He caught himself muttering, “Why did I wait so long in line? It’s just an empty tomb!” A woman nearby happened to overhear him and said,

“Sir, isn’t that the point? It is an empty tomb *because* Jesus is alive!” Frank smiled as he heard these words, and he realized their truth. His heart beat a little stronger as he became aware of an overwhelming sense of peace and joy coming upon himself. *Christ is risen, indeed!*

Today’s gospel lesson in Luke finds the disciples in a similar mood on the first Sunday of Easter. They are perplexed, disappointed, troubled, and frightened about the last couple of days. They had witnessed Jesus’ arrest and the sham of a trial that ordered his execution.

Most troubling of all, they saw firsthand his brutal death on a cross

between two criminals. They had even heard his sorrowful cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These were men who had given up everything to follow Jesus because they had believed he was the long awaited Messiah. But now he was gone. Or was he?

Luke chapter 24 reports a series of encounters that transformed a group of frightened and confused disciples into an organized movement of passionate apostles who would live out their days as world-changers. What happened to make this possible? Is the story of Jesus’ resurrection a credible report, or is it simply *too good* to be true?

The chapter describes a series of incredible events that followed Jesus’ death on the cross. First is the discovery of the empty tomb, first by the women, who meet two angelic beings who announce *Jesus is risen*. Then, Peter runs to find out for himself, also discovering an empty tomb, and leaves confused and perplexed.

Second, there is the narrative describing two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus who are joined by Jesus, whom they don’t recognize. They walk with him all the way to Emmaus and when they arrive, invite Jesus to stay for dinner. As they sat at table, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks for it, broke it and gave it to them. And in *this* moment, the eyes of the disciples were opened and they recognize Jesus. Instantly, Jesus disappears.

The two disciples get up from the table and race back to Jerusalem to share this experience with the others. The eleven are already gathered together, declaring the resurrection of Jesus. Cleopas and his companion tell their story and while they were talking, Jesus appears again, saying, “Peace be with you.” And that brings us to today’s lesson.

What is so striking about this encounter is the reaction of the disciples.

Verse 37 tells us they were startled and frightened by Jesus. This may seem astonishing to us who take the resurrection for granted. *Why were they so frightened? How could they have been so clueless?*

Perhaps the story of the resurrection has become a bit too domesticated for us. We have grown so accustomed to it that we take it for granted. Think about it for a minute. How many dead women and men do we know who have come back to life?

Most of us have lived long enough to know that the grave marks the end of life. We've all been to funerals before, but it would be a safe bet to say that none of those honored at a funeral have shown up at subsequent family events. Dead men and women simply do not rise.

This is true in 2021 as much as it was true at the time of Jesus' death. Ancient people were not any more naïve about the finality of death than we are today. It surely shocked them to see Jesus again after witnessing his death only a few days earlier.

Yet, our text asserts that this is the case – Jesus was truly alive and present in front of them. Verse 41 describes what may very well have been the same reaction many of us would have had. “While in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering...” The fact that Jesus stood before their eyes was simply *too good to be true*.

Why? If Jesus were truly alive, then this would mean he really was the long-awaited Savior from God. If Jesus were truly alive, then everything he taught and promised would be validated. If Jesus were truly alive, then life would be different.

Jesus breaks through the disbelief of the disciples with a simple gesture. He requests some food and eats in their presence. Apparently, this is enough to gain a hearing with them. In verses 44-48 Jesus offers

what must have been the greatest Sunday school class ever taught. He opened their minds to the Scriptures and carefully instructs them on how the scriptures had foretold his suffering, death and resurrection. The result would be the proclamation of salvation to all nations beginning in Jerusalem. He then appoints them to be his witnesses and promises a power from on high to accomplish the mission. Wow! What a lesson!

So, what is the word for us today? It is quite simple. Jesus' resurrection is not merely a story of hope for the future. Rather, it is a commission to participate in God's plan of salvation. In light of Jesus' resurrection, His church is called to *mission*.

The mission begins in a present location and then extends to the world. Mission becomes the reason for the disciples' continued existence on earth. By being witnesses to the resurrection, they become ambassadors who will start the train that carries the true significance of the resurrection to *all* places.

The resurrection proclaims the possibility of forgiveness and transformation. The world as we know it does not have to be the final word. God intends something better and greater, and God has given this message to Jesus' followers.

So, what about us? What does the resurrection mean for us today? In short order, let me offer six beautiful ways the resurrection makes all the difference in the world:

1. If Jesus is alive today, we have the hope of true and authentic transformation in our lives.
2. If Jesus is alive today, we can offer the world substantial healing.
3. If Jesus is alive today, we can live courageously for an ethic greater than our own comfort and indulgence.

4. If Jesus is alive today, we can console a grieving family with the hope of a final resurrection.
5. If Jesus is alive today, we can work meaningfully on behalf of the poor and the disenfranchised.
6. Finally, if Jesus is alive today, we can surrender our foibles, sins and infirmities, our gifts, talents and ambitions to God and allow God to raise us to a new life, a new life in which we begin to embody Jesus' values and reflect his character to the world around us.

What about us? What if Jesus truly is alive today? What if following Jesus means a radically new life in which we begin to experience the life of the age to come in our own day? Too good to be true?

Some would say, "Yes." But the earliest apostolic witnesses tell us, "No, not too good to be true. Jesus *is* alive and the world will never be the same!"

What do you say?