

Swiss Church in London

Easter Service 2005

Sermon: Lk 24,1-12: The Resurrection of Christ

Dear friends, dear Parishioners

We have heard the account of Christ's resurrection as it is told by Luke. Did you notice that it is very much a women's story? All persons appearing at Jesus' empty tomb first are women. Many of them are nameless women who "had come with Him from Galilee" (Luke 23,55).

"Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared" (Luke 24,1). Among these "other women" are names we know very well: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James.

I find it very interesting that it was women who came to Jesus' tomb first and in great number. They cared about him even when they thought that he had died and was no more. They mourned for him, visiting his grave and bringing spices and oils. There are no men present; they had all fled and did not dare to come to the tomb. But the women are there. – Maybe it is not such a new phenomenon that the Churches are filled with so many more women than men after all? Maybe their religious vein is more distinctive than the men's. Maybe it was female intuition that told them that with Jesus' death not everything can just be over. – Whatever it was that brought these women back to the grave, they made the most amazing discovery in the history of religion: the empty tomb. When the women arrived at the cave where Jesus was buried they realized that someone had opened the grave, removing the stone covering the entrance. This alone and the fact that the cave was empty does not mean much. Someone could have removed the corpse and carried it away. But the women at the cave had a peculiar vision. Two men wearing shining white clothes delivered a strange and quite incomprehensible message to them: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? "He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, "saying, 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.' " And they remembered His words. – Angels opened their eyes and their hearts; all of a sudden they began to understand what had happened. They remembered what Jesus had told them about his fate when He was still among them. At that time they could not

understand what Jesus was saying, but now the scales fell off their eyes. What Jesus had prophesied had become true: He was “delivered into the hands of sinful men, and He was crucified, and the third day He was risen again.”

The women believed these words and brought the message of Christ’s resurrection to the Apostles. And, what a contrast to the women’s reaction, the men who surrounded Jesus for 3 years and who had been his closest disciples, did not understand and could not believe what they heard. A woman’s testimony was not worth much at that time anyway. It wasn’t even considered to be trustworthy enough to stand in a trial! The Bible reflects that, when it says that the women's words seemed to the Apostles like idle tales, and that they did not believe them.

When Peter heard what allegedly had happened, he ran to the tomb and found it empty and he “marvelled to himself at what had happened”. – The empty tomb alone is no evidence and does not create faith. Peter does not come to believe in the resurrection when he sees that the corpse had gone. It takes more than just an empty tomb. According to the gospel accounts, Jesus was seen by many eyewitnesses after his resurrection. We remember Thomas who could not believe his eyes and who needed to touch the wounds. “Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20,29). This is also addressed to us who live now and who have no choice but to believe without seeing and without touching.

Easter is the central and defining moment of our Christian faith. In three points I would like to explore why the message of Easter is so fundamental and so important:

Firstly, the message of Easter is the message of Christian hope.

Jesus' life story did not end with Good Friday on the Cross. Those forces which brought Him to the crucifixion did not get the last word. Evil does not win, death is not final. Christ's victory over death and sin is the base for our own hope that in the end, God's yes will prevail over His no, love over hatred, life over death. Easter is God's ultimate yes to life and to His son, Jesus Christ - and in Him, God's yes to all who believe.

By raising His Son from the dead, God validated Christ's ministry, underlined His preaching and gave Him His final blessing. Raising His Son from the realm of death and darkness and bringing Him back to the living is God's powerful statement that it is through Jesus Christ that we know God and His will for us.

Easter is the base for our hope that we, too, will eventually win victory over death and darkness; that we, too, will be united with God and live even when we die. As Jesus was raised from the dead and lives, so will we conquer death and be received by God who is more powerful than death.

The second important point to make is the following: Jesus Christ is alive and reigns in the unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Although Christ is obviously not physically present with us today, He is with us through His Spirit. - Before Jesus died, He instituted the Last Supper as a means to create a special awareness of His presence among us. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, which stand for the body and the blood of Christ, we are united with the risen Christ. In the elements of bread and wine, Christ is present and gives himself anew for us who faithfully receive the communion.

Jesus Christ is alive and He is present through the Holy Spirit!

The third point I want to make is a historical one:

Easter is the hour of birth of the Christian faith. Why? Because before Christ's resurrection, believing meant being a good Jew, or, in other words, believing like Jesus. He was of Jewish faith and the only Holy Scriptures known to Him were those of the Old Testament. Christ's disciples were of Jewish faith and their Church was the Temple or the Synagogue.

With Easter this changed fundamentally. There was a significant shift from believing like Jesus to believing in Jesus. From now on, Christians were people who believed in Christ and saw in Him the promised Messiah. It was now, after Easter, that people started to write down the gospels, the letters and the other documents which make up the New Testament. With Easter, the certainty grew that Christ was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, the Saviour of mankind. Looking back from here, everything that had happened before made sense: his prophecies concerning His dying and rising again, his crucifixion, and His whole life.

What the women at the grave discovered and what the Angels told them subsequently changed the history of the world dramatically. Jesus Christ was not a false prophet, his ministry did not end in a disaster, evil did not win over good. The Christian faith and with it, the message of hope was born and soon started to conquer the world. Starting with the women by the empty tomb, the story of Christ's resurrection went around the planet, touching people's hearts and inspiring faith. This faith also reached us and gives us hope, - the hope that one day

we will be united with the living Christ. In the meantime we shall go our way with confidence that Christ is with us in His Spirit to comfort and guide us. We shall be strengthened by His Holy Communion and derive a firm faith from it, that Jesus had also died and suffered for us. If He died and suffered for us, then He was also raised for us so that He will be there for us, now and forever more.

Amen.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Amen

Rev David Leuenberger