

“Not a Chance . . .”

Sermon for 5 April 2015

- Texts: Luke 24:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Facts are stubborn things. The women came bearing spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus. They discover an opened tomb, a missing body and are joined by two men whose shining raiment suggest they are angelic beings. *The women are terrified and bow face down to the ground.* There's a message: **Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember, how He told you . . .** When Peter does go to check out the tomb, he also experiences the absence of the Roman and Jewish temple guards and notices that Jesus' burial clothes have been neatly set aside, folded up in a pile is what's implied. Still, no body.

Now when we revisit Jesus' prophetic words about His upcoming, brutal treatment in Jerusalem, we are told in five different places, in several different times and places, *that the disciples simply didn't get it!* And they would continue in that puzzlement until they encountered the risen Lord later, after the resurrection. **He has risen** didn't communicate very much, or, at least, not enough to resolve their perplexity. Was the body stolen? No, not a chance!

They were unprepared for the resurrection, unfamiliar with resurrection power—the very stuff of Easter—and it would appear God planned it that way. This is what we should dig into today for we follow a risen Savior and obey a resurrected Lord Jesus through godly obedience. Therefore, although the scene as it unfolded before the women was astonishing, the reaction of the Eleven and all the disciples with them is predictable: **they did not believe the women, for their words seemed like nonsense.** The disciples seem more recognizable to us because they come across as skeptical, not unlike the disbelieving Jews of that day—or suspicious unbelievers of our day! Skepticism is a familiar, supposedly enlightened philosophical posture in our secular, pluralistic day! So much for the odd suggestion that the disciples were simple, dupable, and easily misled men, naïve enough to ascribe to such obsolete supernaturalism.

However, the skeptics do not have the facts on their side this time. On the face of it, the open tomb, the absent guards, the folded grave clothes and even the missing body both defy expectation and demand explanation. This is so even if we delete the angelic visitation *and their message!* Surely there is some naturalistic explanation we can run to because **Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, He is risen!** presses us toward the miraculous and supernatural. God leaves nothing to chance. The ultimate is not an accident! Women who have prepared spices and anointments to apply to Jesus' corpse fully anticipate a body to work on! He is risen means that Jesus has defeated death, He has escaped the grave . . . no one has behaved so shockingly before! It will take some time before the aptness of Jesus'

astonishing words **I have the power to lay down My life and the power to take it up again. This charge I have from My Father** can really sink in. Disbelief and dismay add to the realism of the event—whatever joy there might be would be baffled and muted at first. It would take dramatic confirmation, and realization of “the new order of things” to loose the laughter and full, free joy. ***We live by the power of God, we serve the purposes of God and there’s not a chance this isn’t verifiably true! We worship a living Lord whose feet have marked the dust.***

There is something else going on here above the maze of human history and earth-bound circumstance. Yes, victory over death and the grave is being enacted, and that is a complete vindication of His work coupled with a disclosure of His true identity: **Declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord¹ (Romans 1:4, ESV)** Now the disciples would be able to answer their own terrified question, **And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”** (Matthew 8:27, Luke 8:25 and Mark 4:41) He is the Son of God in power; yes, even the very Jesus Christ our Lord! “He is alive” means He is victorious over death, the grave and the wickedness of mankind . . . and over Satan and all the enemies of God! Behold, ***He walks about in resurrection power, subduing death, conquering the grave, and redefining our reality. He defeats futility and nullifies the rule of chance.***

After the discoveries in the tomb (with the words of the angel still reverberating in their ears), Matthew relates that the women met the risen Lord. They are neither delusional, nor high on grief or drugs. Their **collective** terror gradually gives way to **shared** exultant joy. I suggest this because Mark records that there was a moment where they decided to say nothing to anyone. And subsequently, perhaps, this encounter (a short session of worshipping Jesus) gave them courage to tell the others what they had experienced after all. They probably anticipated a skeptical reception. **They did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense.** (Luke 24:11) Peter checked out the grave site. Where was the body?

Matthew 28: **11** While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. **12** When the chief priests had met with the elders

¹ Ro 1:4 But declared [to be] the Son of God. Though in human form he was demonstrated to be divine by power, such power as he displayed in mighty miracles and especially by the greater miracle of his own resurrection from the dead. According to the spirit of holiness. It must be noted that this is a contrast with "according to the flesh" in Ro 1:3, and hence must refer to our Lord's holy nature. The body was descended from David, but the pure, holy life was demonstrated to be divine. One was a human nature; the other was a divine nature. This nature is spoken of as "the spirit of holiness", because it is contrasted with sinful flesh.

and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

This brazen lie concocted by the chief priests and elders would probably not have passed the smell test except that, to his credit, Pilate found the whole crucifixion of an innocent man truly distasteful. (The punishment for a Roman sleeping on guard duty was swift and drastic.) That, and his terror of the supernatural, probably persuaded the governor to opt for the stolen body idea *only the body was never located!* The idea that the King of the Jews was alive would likely have been suppressed for the sake of keeping Jesus dead.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:14-16: ¹⁴ **The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.** ¹⁵ **The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.** ¹⁶ **“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.** The Jewish leaders regarded the report of these current events with a carnal mind, **they are folly** (or foolishness) **to him!** For the moment the Eleven joined them in this skepticism. Now let us turn to our final Easter reading.

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

There are six Easter benefits for us by virtue of Jesus’ resurrection (which I have gleaned from John Piper and wish to pass on this Easter to you).

1. We Are Forgiven for Our Sins

The hindrance of our sins is removed, we are reconciled to the Father and the blessings can flow freely. Everything hinges on being forgiven! Romans 4:25 puts it

like this. "He was handed over [to death] on account of our transgressions, and he was raised on account of our justification."

This means that by his death he has paid the penalty for our sins and purchased our acquittal, our justification; yes, our forgiveness. And since the achievement of the cross was so complete and the work of our justification so decisive, God raised Jesus from the dead to validate our forgiveness and to vindicate his Son's righteousness and, thereby, to celebrate the perfect work of justification. Our longing to be forgiven is answered here. "Everybody in this room this morning needs forgiveness, and deep inside, even when we don't think about it, we long for it."

2. Our Faith Is Well-Founded

Jesus is trustworthy. He keeps His promises to those who love and believe in Him. God wants trust back between us, between Him and between each other. He heals the wounds of betrayal in the body of Jesus; in His suffering for us in our place. Count on Jesus. He comes through.

The life I live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

3. The Apostles Preach What Is True

Because of the resurrection the apostles preach what is true. They are not false witnesses about God. They are true ones. Our young people are being taught (and many of us were taught) that there is no absolute truth—something that is true all the time and everywhere whether people know it or like it. It is a rare teenager today who has the guts and independence to say, for example, in a high school health class that premarital sex is wrong—wrong for everybody, not just those who think it's wrong. Homosexual activity is wrong—wrong for everybody and not just those who think it's wrong.

Without the conviction that there are absolutes that can be shared and made the basis for society, the only end will be anarchy where everyone does what is right in his own eyes. Therefore the need for truth is a deep need of the human soul and human society. And Jesus came into the world to say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). And then he rose from the dead to vindicate his claim. Jesus has a right to tell us what is absolutely true because in the resurrection God proved him to be absolutely true.

4/5. We Are to Be Envied

Fourth and fifth, from verse 19, because of the resurrection we are to be envied. Our preaching is not in vain—it is full, meaningful, valid, valuable, significant. If Christ is not raised, then living for him, doing what he says, following his will is a great delusion. But since He has been raised and remains alive and He reigns as

king forever, all our obedience, all our love, all our self-denial is not just not-to-be-pitied, but is positively enviable. "This slight momentary affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison," Paul said (2 Corinthians 4:17). *And there is in every one of us the longing that our lives be well spent*—that our lives count for something, that they have significance and usefulness, that we don't come to the end of our days and conclude, it was all in vain, empty, pointless, useless, insignificant—therefore pitiable.

Paul knows this. That's why he ends this whole chapter on the resurrection (v. 58) with the words: "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Our lives, not in vain! That's the longing of our lives. O Lord let it not be misspent. Let me not come to my grave and say, "I've wasted it!" It does not have to be so. Christ is risen and everything done in his name—by his strength and for his glory—is not in vain. It is enviable. Significant. Valuable. It carries an eternal weight of glory.

6. Those Who Have Fallen Asleep Are Alive

Finally, there is the longing that we shall live forever in joy with all the saints. That we not come to an empty end after a full and valuable life. That we not become a zero, or worse, be damned. And so Paul says in verse 18 that because Christ is raised those who have fallen asleep in him—those who have died in faith—have not perished. Or, put positively, they are still alive. They will live forever. They live the way Christ lives. They will enter into the joy of their Master.

The Greatest News in All the World according to John Piper

The greatest news in all the world is that God and his Son are most glorified in you when you are most satisfied in them. And to make that true God raised his Son Jesus from the dead to reign forevermore.

In raising him from the dead

He gave us forgiveness and glorified Jesus as the all-sufficient forgiver;
 God gave us a friend to count on and glorified Jesus as utterly reliable;
 God gave us guidance and unchanging truth and glorified Jesus as the absolute foundation for truth and righteousness.
 God gave us a life that is not pitiable but enviable, a ministry that is not futile but fruitful, and lives that glorify Jesus as the source and goal of all life and all ministry;
 And God gives us everlasting joy that will not be ended by death.
 God glorifies Himself through Jesus as the author of life, the victor over death, and the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. We get to live all that truth out in service to our King.

Therefore I urge you with all my heart this morning to lift up your heart and say with the choirs on earth and in heaven:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain and hath redeemed us to God by his blood to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.

Amen