

They had seen him on the way to the cross. Already he had been beaten, whipped with a scourge, bruised and bloodied almost beyond recognition. Then the people watched as he was crucified and then hammered down upon the nails as the cross was hoisted to a vertical position and dropped into the hole that had been dug to receive it. They watched his life ebb away, saw him die, and saw the soldier make sure by thrusting his broadsword into his side. They saw the remaining fluids pour out of him.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that he was dead. Joseph of Aramathea and Nicodemus claimed his lifeless body, anointed it with spices, wrapped it in linen and deposited it in the cave found in Joseph's garden. And I say anointed it and wrapped it and deposited it, because once a person has died his body is no longer a him but an it--a lifeless object, not a person any longer. Jesus was gone. Everybody knew that Jesus was dead and gone.

The women who went to the tomb early Sunday Morning to further anoint his body for burial, were rational human beings. They were sad but sure of what they would find there. If anything people in those days were more sure about death and the finality of death than we are today. There was no embalming, no cosmetic tricks to make a corpse look as though it were only sleeping, no refrigeration to postpone the inevitable. All they had were the spices to absorb the moisture and to mask the odors. The women knew what to expect and what not to expect. They were incredibly sad, but were harboring no irrational hopes.

But when Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James came through the grove of trees which surrounded the garden and came in sight of the tomb they were first of all relieved and then horrified. They were relieved because the stone had been rolled away from the entrance and they had been worried about how they could move the stone. But they were soon horrified when they realized that the body of Jesus that they had come to minister to, was gone.

You see, dead bodies didn't normally get up and play hide and seek back then any more than they do today. They were very sure of that. In fact, according to the account in John, their minds went immediately to a rational explanation. Someone must have stolen the body. Perhaps the gardener has moved it. The women chose the rational explanations over the irrational.

But while they were still trying to wrap their minds around the disappearance of Jesus' body another event assaulted their senses. Luke 24:4 says: "While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them." The women weren't accustomed to missing bodies and they weren't accustomed to seeing angels either. The Scripture says: "In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground."

Please not that the women weren't afraid of being in a cemetery. They weren't scared because they were superstitious. They were afraid because things were out of place. Dead bodies are supposed to stay put and angels are supposed to stay invisible. I think most of us would agree.

But the women were in for a third shock and this was "the clincher," "the straw that breaks the camel's back," "the thing that blew them out of the water." According to the latter part of verse 5 through verse 7, the angels or gleaming men spoke and said to them: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Verse 8 says of the women: "Then they remembered his words."

It was at this point that the women really began to experience the beautiful doubt which I am referring too in the title of today's sermon. The women began to doubt that their former understanding to the world was complete and wholly accurate. They began to doubt that they knew it all. They began to be opened up to the possibility that God is alive and that God can do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can possibly think or imagine.

The problem with most of us most of the time is that we live within the confines of our small rational minds, unable to think, imagine, or dream beyond what we have already been taught or beyond what we can actually see. And that's sad.

I am told by people who know more about this sort of thing than I do that many animals actually prefer cages. They say the best way to housebreak a puppy is to keep him in a cage. When you go to bed or go away from the house, put your puppy in his cage. Why? Two

reasons: #1 he won't soil where he sleeps (that's a good thing!) & #2 he feels more secure. You will notice that when the cage of the women's thinking was broken open at the tomb, when they could no longer see the boundaries, they were terrified. But the beautiful thing about doubt is that it can set you free from all your preconceived notions and all your prejudices. The beautiful thing about doubting your present understanding is that it can open your heart to the new things God surely wants to give you--like forgiveness for instance, and like heaven and like everlasting life. **Unless we doubt our present understanding of the world death rules and death wins.**

Well, with their early morning visit to the empty tomb of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others, were set free from death's cage. The same power which freed Jesus also freed them. Their despair was transformed into hope, and then they began to share hope with others.

Verse 9 says: "When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others." The disciples and apostles of Jesus are told the good news. Does anyone here remember how they greeted that Good News? That's right! They didn't believe it. These men who had walked with Jesus for three years and seen him heal the sick, cure the cripples, and give sight to the blind, were blind to the possibility that Jesus had conquered death. Verse 11 says: "But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." The disciples were still locked in the cage of their rationalistic thinking. That the tomb should be empty; that the women had seen and spoken with angels; that Jesus could be alive--it all seemed like nonsense. It was more than they could handle.

But it was also enough to raise a bit of that beautiful kind of doubt. Verse 12 says, "Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened." God's truth was banging on the outside of Peter's cage saying to him, "let me in," or, perhaps, "come on out and play with me." Peter's doubt was prelude to him experiencing the presence of his resurrected Lord for himself. It opened his life to receive something new.

The ironic thing about my message to you this morning is that I'm saying salvation begins with doubt not with faith. In other words we

must first doubt the sufficiency of where we are to get beyond where we are. That's why the apostles say "repent and believe the Gospel." You have to doubt and put away your old way of thinking in order to believe and to embrace the mind of Christ.

Now I want to share with you this morning four things I believe we need to doubt on this Resurrection Morning. First of all, we need to doubt that the physical world that we can see and touch is all there is. Clearly, it isn't. I remember a time in Compassionate Friends when Phyllis Heaton and I were talking with a newly bereaved mother. In trying to come to grips with her child's death, this mother was asking questions about the spiritual world. She didn't feel the need to go there before but her loss opened a new door.

We were able to share with her how God has spoken to us in dreams and how He has guided our lives and answered many of our prayers. The Bible makes it very clear that the spiritual world is real and that we ourselves are spiritual beings as well as beings of flesh and blood. We need to doubt anything which says differently. We must take the spiritual life seriously and ask God to open our hearts and minds to experience it. There is no need to wait until tragedy strikes to reach out to God.

A second thing we need to doubt this morning is that we can live life fully without God. If you think you don't need God, think again. Proverbs 14:12 & 16:25 both say: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." Paul says in I Corinthians 10:12: "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" In case you haven't noticed, life in this world is getting crazier and crazier and more and more complicated and more and more dangerous. Psalm says "the Fool has said in his heart that there is no God." And no one has ever been more of a fool than the person who would say that now.

A third thing I would have us doubt this morning is that our own goodness is good enough to save us. Actually, when I am inviting people to come to Christ or just inviting them to come to church when they don't want too, I get one of two excuses in one form or another. There are those who say "I'm already as good or better than the people who say they are Christians or as good or better than the people who go to church. In other words, I'm good enough the way I am." Or I run

into people who say "I've committed so many sins God could never forgive me; it's too late for me to change now." Now if you have a tendency to say either of those things and are just making an exception today because it's Easter, let me urge you to doubt your position. The truth that the Bible teaches is that no one is so good that he doesn't need to be saved, and no one is so bad that she cannot be forgiven. There are two verses in Romans which tell the story: Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." and Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

A fourth and final thing I believe we need to doubt this morning is that death has the last word. I've preached 3 funerals in the last four weeks. Two of them were really tough because they came without warning and those who died were so young. Candy Barger was only 46 years old and Heather Brunner was only 36. Then Janet Mauk died Tuesday morning and her funeral was on Good Friday. Janet and I shared our last words together on earth on Friday, a week ago.

But I want you to know how precious two little words in that last sentence are to me: I said "we shared our last words together on earth." But these will not be our last words. In I Corinthians 15:19, the apostle Paul exclaims: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." Verse 22 adds: "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Janet belongs to Christ so do I, and because of that, death will not have the last word. Death can take our loved ones in Christ from us for a little while but not forever. And that my friends is why we celebrate Easter. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! **"Alleluia!" "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!"**

As we go forth from this time of worship this morning: doubt that this world is all there is, doubt that life can ever be lived fully without God, doubt that our own goodness can ever be good enough to save us, and doubt that death will have the last word. Doubt all these things and then believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe in His resurrection and in His kingdom. Believe that only He can give us life as life was meant to be. Believe that His death on the cross pays for all our sins. Believe that He gives us victory over death. **The Bible says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!"**

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Sermon for April 16, 2017

The Beautiful Thing About Doubt

Luke 24:1-12

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The Beautiful Thing about Doubt

One of the interesting and comforting things I find in the various biblical accounts of the Resurrection of Jesus from the grave is that the people back then reacted to the initial reports of his miraculous escape from death with the same level of skepticism that we would feel if we were in their shoes.