

The Threat of Resurrection

Luke 24:36b-48

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. (NRSV)

I

Imagine that early last week, one of your best friends died. Let’s call her Tilly Jane. When Tilly Jane died, the usual things happened. The attending doctor signed her death certificate. The funeral home sent her body over to Elkhart for cremation. And yesterday afternoon, friends and family gathered from far and wide for Tilly Jane’s funeral. Immediately after the funeral, her cremains were buried in the Violet cemetery.

Then last evening, you and some of your friends gathered in your living room for a bit of reminiscing. Around drinks and snacks, you told fond stories about Tilly Jane. About her term of service with Mennonite Central Committee. About the time she sold her big house and bought a smaller one so she could give more money away. About her love for a fast game of Dutch Blitz.

While you were talking together, suddenly Tilly Jane appeared in the center of your living room. In the flesh. Alive. With the same dimpled grin you know so well. One minute she was gone, and the next minutes she was standing in your living room.

How would you react? What emotions would you feel?

Odds are, you’d be terrified. After attending her funeral and watching her ashes go down into the ground, you’d surely be surprised, then stunned, and perhaps also terrified. After all that had happened, how could Tilly Jane possibly be alive? The laws of the

universe—at least the laws of the universe as you have come to know them—do not allow for the possibility of Tilly Jane being alive. Have the laws of the universe suddenly become irrelevant? Has a rip just formed in the time-space continuum? If Tilly Jane is alive again—and you can see with your own eyes that in fact she is alive—then has some new and fearsome power just entered this world?

II

In Jerusalem on the evening of Easter, people became terrified. That night, a group of friends were meeting together, reminiscing about Jesus, when suddenly there he was, not stretched out on a stone slab in the city cemetery as the laws of the universe said he should have been, but standing among them, grinning, with the old sparkle back in his eyes.

Luke says they were terrified. Startled and terrified (v. 37).

This feeling of terror appears in some of the other resurrection stories, not just this one. For example in the gospel of Matthew, both the guards and the women are terrified by resurrection (28:4, 8). In the gospel of Mark, the story ends with Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome fleeing from the empty tomb in such terror that they can't talk (16:8).¹ And here in Luke, the disciples are startled and terrified.

To be sure, in most stories the intimate friends of Jesus eventually feel joy at seeing him alive again. In most of our Easter celebrations, we try to get to the joy immediately. We sing up-beat songs, gleefully proclaim Christ is risen, and maybe even dress up in more festive clothes than we normally wear. We eat Easter breakfasts and Easter dinners. We treat ourselves to potted spring flowers and fancy chocolates. We suppose the primary Easter feeling is joy.

Yet one theme running through the stories of Jesus' resurrection is that terror frequently comes first. When people see Jesus alive, they are plain scared. At one level, they are scared because they think they're seeing a ghost or a vision. At another level,

¹ Most scholars believe Mark originally ended with verse 8. Verses 9-20, included in most Bibles, were added later, perhaps centuries later, to smooth over Mark's abrupt ending.

maybe they are afraid they're losing their minds. For the first followers of Jesus, the resurrection stirred up scary feelings.

III

However, resurrection was not scary just for the followers of Jesus. Resurrection also terrified the people in power.

As a case in point, consider the Sadducees. As you may remember, the Sadducees were a tiny, rich, and powerful group of Jewish men centered in Jerusalem. The high priests in charge of the Temple were Sadducees. They controlled the daily round of sacrifices on the high altar. They managed the Temple's considerable income. They sat on the influential Sanhedrin. And they were friendly to the Roman procurator and the Roman empire which that procurator represented. In fact, you could say that the Romans had these Sadducee men in their back pocket. One powerful symbol of how the Romans controlled the Sadducees is that for 364 days a year, the Roman procurator had the high priest's ceremonial robes locked away. Only one day a year, on the day of Atonement, did the Roman procurator unlock the storage closet and give the high priest—generally a Sadducee—the robes of his office. For this reason and others like it, most ordinary Jews thought the Sadducees were toadies for the empire.²

Here's the thing: these rich, power-hungry, empire-supporting Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (Lk. 20:27). They believed that once you died, you stayed permanently dead. As a consequence of this belief, they were profoundly threatened by the resurrection of Jesus and the ways it empowered his followers. When Luke sat down to write the book of Acts, he detailed just how threatened the Sadducees and their allies were. These powerful men were annoyed (4:2), amazed by their boldness of Christians (4:13), filled with jealousy (5:17), perplexed (5:24), and so angry they wanted to kill (5:33, 7:54). When resurrection power was unleashed in the followers of Jesus, the Sadducees and their cronies tried to suppress the emerging church with by threats (4:21), arrests

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(5:18), flogging (5:40), defamation (6:11), stoning (7:58), “severe persecution” (8:1), and death by sword (12:2).

IV

The behavior of the Sadducees demonstrates how resurrection threatens people in power. Like the Sadducees, many people today live their lives as if there is no resurrection. Take death. Many people in the world assume that once someone dies, those dead people are going to stay good and dead. When the Pentagon drops a bomb on a little village in Afghanistan, the generals and admirals assume the people in that village will die and stay dead. When the state of Texas lethally injects a prisoner with chemicals, it assumes that prisoner will stay dead. When a white police officer shoots a black man in the chest and kills him, the officer assumes the black man’s death will be permanent.

But what if death is reversible? What would happen if the American military could no longer take it for granted that the people they killed would stay dead? Imagine what would happen in war if your enemies come back to life a few days after you bombed them. What would the state of Texas do if all 1,304 prisoners they’ve executed since 1819 suddenly rose up from their graves and started walking around again? What would police departments do if every black man shot on the streets rose up out of the cemeteries and returned to their daily lives?

If these things happened, many powerful people would suddenly get scared, just like the Sadducees got scared. Bombs would be irrelevant. Guns would be useless. This is what resurrection teases us to consider: a new world where death is not the end, but is instead an opportunity for resurrection. In the world with resurrection, all sorts of things start to shift around, and not in ways that everyone is going to like. Resurrection is a major threat to the powerful.

Resurrection doesn’t have to happen in a literal sense. It can also happen in a figurative sense. For example, think of the alcoholic who bottoms out but then through hard work successfully stays in recovery. The bottoming out is a kind of death, while the recovery is a kind of resurrection. Think of the woman who lost her job after the Great

Recession of 2007-2009, but then reinvents herself and moves into a new vocation where she now thrives. Losing her job felt like dying, while finding a new vocation felt like rising from the ashes.

On the national stage, think of the adulterer-in-chief in Washington D.C., who assumed for a long time that with enough money and power he could silence all the women he has allegedly committed adultery with. His efforts to silence women are a kind of death. But when those women speak publicly and tell the truth, they take new life into their hands. They enact a kind of resurrection which then frightens the man in power.

This is what resurrection does. It scares the powerful who are deeply invested in keeping the old ways of death in place. It has the capacity to upend events, reverse supposed certainties, and dethrone old verities.

V

Resurrection, therefore, is fundamentally about change that brings life. God's life, expressed in resurrection, shatters human efforts to manage, manipulate, and control. If we pay attention and look through the eyes of faith, we can see God's resurrection power breaking out in a thousand places against oppression, tyranny, bondage, intolerance, brutality, and violence. Resurrection shows us that God has not given up. God does not quit. God will eventually have God's way. God is on the move. Where do you see it?