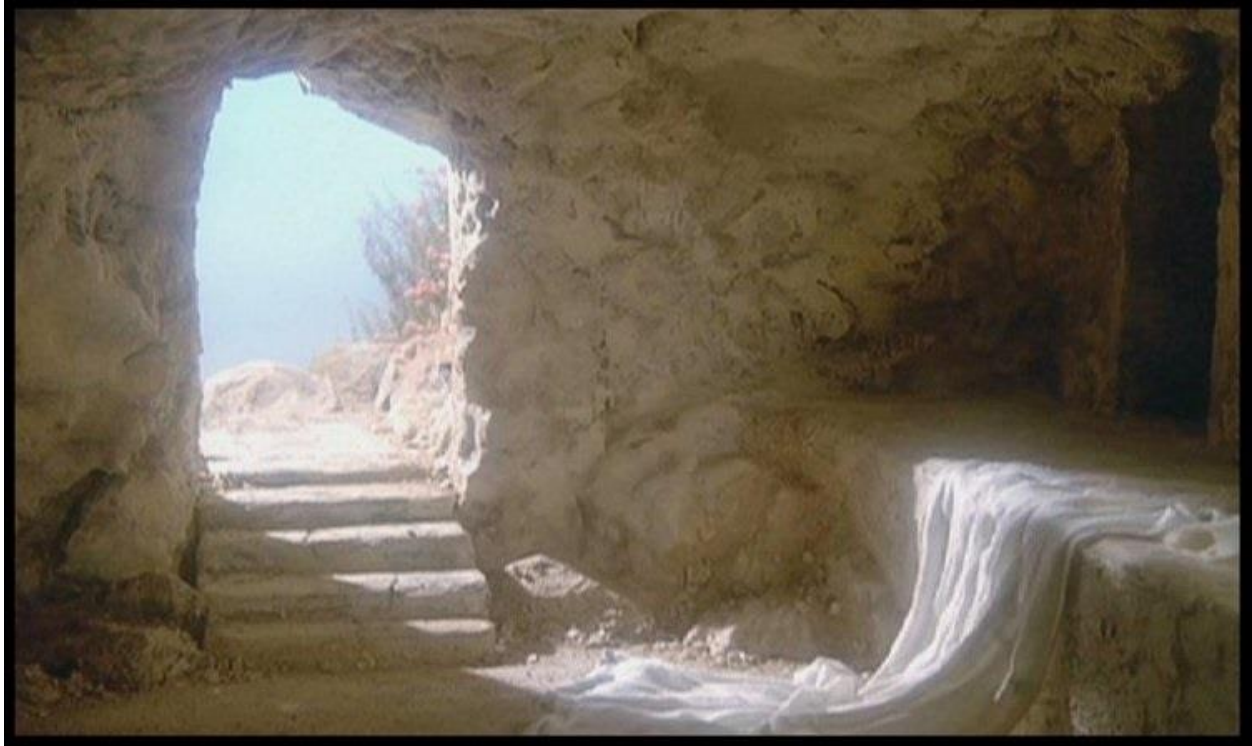


A Life of Jesus

"the Resurrected One"

seventh in a seven-part series



This is the last sermon in a series of seven that I have been preaching all during the season of Lent this year, in an endeavor to sketch the life of Jesus from beginning to end. Last Sunday we looked at the final days of Jesus' public ministry. We looked at what the Church calls the Passion Narratives, that details the events that resulted in Jesus' arrest and execution.

Two weeks ago, I observed the several times that Jesus predicted his death and resurrection before his triumphant entry in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. On three separate occasions Jesus is reputed to have told his disciples plainly that the Son of Man must suffer many things, that he would be delivered to the chief priests and scribes and be rejected by them, who would

condemn him to death and deliver him to the Gentiles, and that they would mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, kill him, and after three days he would rise from the dead. Two weeks ago I expressed my disbelief that Jesus had ever foreseen so exactly the details of his death and resurrection. The predictions seem to me to be too specific, seemed to be based upon the later events and then projected backwards into the story by the Gospel writers, presumably to show that Jesus was not taken unawares in Jerusalem. But this was their concern, I think, not Jesus'.

There had been increasing trouble every time Jesus and his disciples went up to Jerusalem, as we have seen in this series. It was nothing new that the crowds turned against Jesus, for at least twice before they had attempted to stone him there (Jn. 8.59, 10.31). It was nothing new that the authorities had tried to arrest Jesus, for they had attempted to arrest him there several times before in Jerusalem (Jn 8.20, 10.39). It was nothing new that the authorities were intent to put Jesus to death, for numerous times before they had so contrived (Jn. 5.18, 11.53). Thus it would not be surprising that Jesus had anticipated trouble if he was heading to Jerusalem again. But did he know the exact details of his last days? Did he know specifically that he would be tried and killed, and most importantly, did he know that after three days he would rise from the dead? And then did he plainly convey these details to his disciples beforehand? I do not think so.

To begin with, the disciples were surprised and dismayed in the Garden of Gethsemane when the mob arrived to arrest Jesus. Peter rashly drew his sword trying to prevent them and was scolded for it by Jesus. And then what did the disciples do next? According to the Scriptures, they all forsook Jesus and fled (Mk. 14.50). Shortly thereafter Peter panicked in the courtyard of the High Priest and three times denied even knowing Jesus. And Judas, the one who handed Jesus over the authorities, seems so surprised that they condemned Jesus to death that he repented and hanged himself, while all the others hid behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities.

And none of the disciples appear to be expecting the resurrection three days later. The women who came that first Easter morning to the tomb, they came not in anticipation of a predicted resurrection, but they came instead with oils and spices to simply finishing burying Jesus, whose body was taken down from the cross quickly on Friday night as the Sabbath arrived. When the women reached the place where Jesus was buried, they discovered that the tomb was empty. Now to us the Empty Tomb is a powerful symbol of the Resurrection, but to the disciples they thought only of a robbed grave. They didn't strike their foreheads and suddenly remember that Jesus had predicted his rising on the third day. They were instead filled with horror and sadness that his tomb had been desecrated and his body removed.

After a moment of shock, Mary Magdalene appears to have broken away from the group and rushed out of the garden in dismay to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple that the tomb was empty. Meanwhile the other women, according to Matthew's Gospel, met Jesus himself and fell at his feet and worshipped him (Mt. 16.8-9). But when they reported this to the other apostles, according to Luke's account, their words seemed to be "an idle tale," and the others did not believe them (Lk. 24.9, 11). They were not, it seems, expecting to see Jesus alive again.

After Mary Magdalene's report of the Tomb being empty, Peter and the Beloved Disciple ran to see what had happened. The tomb was empty, the linen clothes lying there undisturbed. When the Beloved Disciple entered the tomb after Peter, according to the Fourth Gospel, "he (alone) saw and believed," but we are told that he said nothing to anyone (Jn. 20.3-10). According to the Fourth Gospel, Mary Magdalene remained outside the tomb, weeping. And as she wept, Jesus appeared to her and asked, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" But she supposing him only to be the gardener said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, (tell me) and I will take him away." Only when he spoke her name, did she realize that it was the Risen Jesus and she worshipped him (Jn. 20.15-8), and then she went back to the other disciples as "they mourned and wept" and told them that she had seen the Lord, but

according to Mark's Gospel (Mk. 16.9-11), they would not believe her.

Then later that very day, Jesus appeared to two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who were so excited that they returned all the way to Jerusalem and found the eleven gathered together and told them all what had happened and "how (Jesus) had been made know to them in the breaking of the bread" (Lk. 24.35), but according to Mark's account, the others did not believe it (Mk. 16.13). By the time the two disciples had returned from Emmaus, Jesus had also appeared to Simon Peter, because they are told this when they arrived (Lk. 24.33-4). And yet still the company of the disciples did not believe them.

And then as they were talking, the doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jewish authorities, Jesus himself came and stood among them. Only Thomas was missing. Yet according to Luke's Gospel (Lk. 24.36-43), they were startled and frightened by his appearance, and supposed that they saw only a spirit or a ghost, that it wasn't really Jesus. So Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled and why do questionings arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." And in their joy, we are told, they were disbelieving and still wondering. And in Mark's Gospel, Jesus then upbraided the disciples for their unbelief and for

their hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen (Mk. 16.14).

So it shouldn't be surprising that when Thomas returned and they told him that they had seen the Lord, that he didn't believe them; that he demanded proof that it wasn't just a ghost they saw; that he wanted to see the print of the nails in his hands and put his hand in his side to be sure. Poor Thomas has forever been labeled "the Doubter," but the other disciples hadn't come to believe so easily themselves. Except for the Beloved Disciple, none of them had understood the significance of the Empty Tomb, and none of them believed the testimony of the women at the sepulcher, or the disciples on the road to Emmaus, or Mary Magdalene, or even Peter, when they all reported having seen Jesus resurrected. And even when they themselves did see him there that very evening, they thought at first that it was only a ghost, and they questioned in their hearts and disbelieved. Thomas was no different from the others. For belief had not come easily to any of them. None of them seemed to be expecting the Resurrection when it happened.

So it is hard for me to imagine that Jesus ever knew and thrice predicted the details of his Passion to the disciples; that he had spoken plainly to them, that he had foreseen his resurrection after three days. For Jesus' followers seem totally unaware and unbelieving of the events as they unfolded. The

disciples seem instead only frightened and cowering, and disbelieving, hiding behind closed doors in fear.

There is another important clue to the fact that the disciples weren't forewarned by Jesus of the events of that first Easter, a clue hidden in the earliest sermons of the Apostles. In all the early sermons as recorded in Acts, as well as in all the letters of Paul, and of Peter, and the one to the Hebrews (cf. Acts 2.23, 2.32, 3.15, 4.10, 5.30 etc.; Rom. 4.24-5, 6.4, 8.11; 1 Cor. 15.4; 2 cor. 4.14; Gal. 1.1; Eph. 1.20; Heb. 13.20, etc.; 1 Pet. 1.21), in all of the earliest reports of the Resurrection, it is repeatedly and clearly stated that 'God raised up Jesus from the dead.' The verb in each of these cases is transitive; the subject acting upon the direct object. God raised Jesus. Jesus is simply the recipient of God's activity. Jesus has been raised from the dead by God. It is an action, not of Jesus, but of God. God is the initiator; God is the one who does the thing that is done. It is God's hand that saves.

By the time the Evangelists have written their Gospels, there has been a subtle, but I think very crucial change in emphasis. For in other places in the four Gospels and in numerous even later accounts, it is stated again and again instead that 'Jesus rose from the grave.' The verb construction is changed and becomes intransitive. It appears then to be more Jesus' action, not God's. Jesus rose from the tomb, we now say.

"Alleluia Christ is risen" we repeatedly proclaim, "The Lord is risen indeed." He is the active one, and the power seems to belong to him. Though we may say it in a variety of ways, we have altered the authentic Easter message. And in doing so we make the Resurrection something that Jesus did rather than something which God the Father did. And interestingly, all three of the predictions of the Passion by Jesus in the Gospels are in the intransitive form, the later formula, not the earlier one, suggesting again that the Passion predictions are not authentic, but were added to the story later.

Thus I do not believe that Jesus knew what would happen to him there at the end. He did not know that he would be resurrected. He died like all of us mortals, with uncertainty of what lay beyond the grave. As we saw last week, Jesus became passive during his arrest and crucifixion, he allowed himself to be handed over, and he becomes the one acted upon by others. He was arrested. He was bound and dragged from place to place. He was beaten. He was spit upon. He was crucified. He was like a lamb before the slaughter. His own words and his own actions have become ineffectual.

But Jesus trusted in God despite the actions of those around him. He gave no thought of himself at the end, or what would happen to him. It was God's will that must be done, he prayed at Gethsemane. It was into his Father's hands that he commended his spirit on the cross. Jesus simply let go, and let

God. It was an act of great and abiding trust. It was a redemptive act of faith. And God did not abandon Jesus, but came to his help and rescued him.

And after all the others had done to Jesus as they wished, God is the one who does the thing that is finally done. And it is in the last analysis God's action that matters most, not the others', not Jesus', and not our own. Thus what happened that first Easter morning so long ago was totally unexpected. It was an unforeseen epiphany of the power of God. It was a great bewildering mystery, and the disciples' confusing retelling of that great mystery is itself evidence of its unexpectedness. For the various Gospel accounts conflict with one another in announcing the Resurrection time after time. For instance, in the Fourth Gospel, only Mary Magdalene is reported as going to the tomb that Easter morning (Jn. 20.1). In Matthew's account, it is Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who go. Mark also includes Salome. And Luke suggests that they were even other women present. In Mark's account, the women discover a young man, robed in white, who announces the resurrection. In Matthew's account, he is identified as an angel. In Luke's version, there are two angels. In the Fourth Gospel, it is Jesus himself who appears. In Mark's Gospel, the message of the angels is that the disciples will see the Resurrected Jesus in Galilee, but in Luke's version, they see him in Jerusalem.

There is also total confusion in the telling of this tale, except for one fact, namely, that God did something powerful and unexpected that day, that God raised Jesus from the tomb in some fashion or another, and that that fact changes everything else. Those early Christians, just like Christians today, may disagree about the exact details and what it all means. But we all remain united on this day in asserting God's mysterious power and the fact that Jesus was alive again. Thus we are here today to celebrate and proclaim, not that Jesus rose from the tomb, but that God raised him. How God did it, I do not know. But I am ready to boldly confess my faith in God. For in God and in his activity lies our ultimate hope of eternal life, of our sharing with Jesus in the resurrection of the dead. For God can and still works wonders in our lives, if we but let him, if we but trust in the Father as Jesus did. For God, and God alone, can make new that which is old in our lives, can raise up that which has been put down, can recover that which was lost, and can bring to life which was dead. Amen.