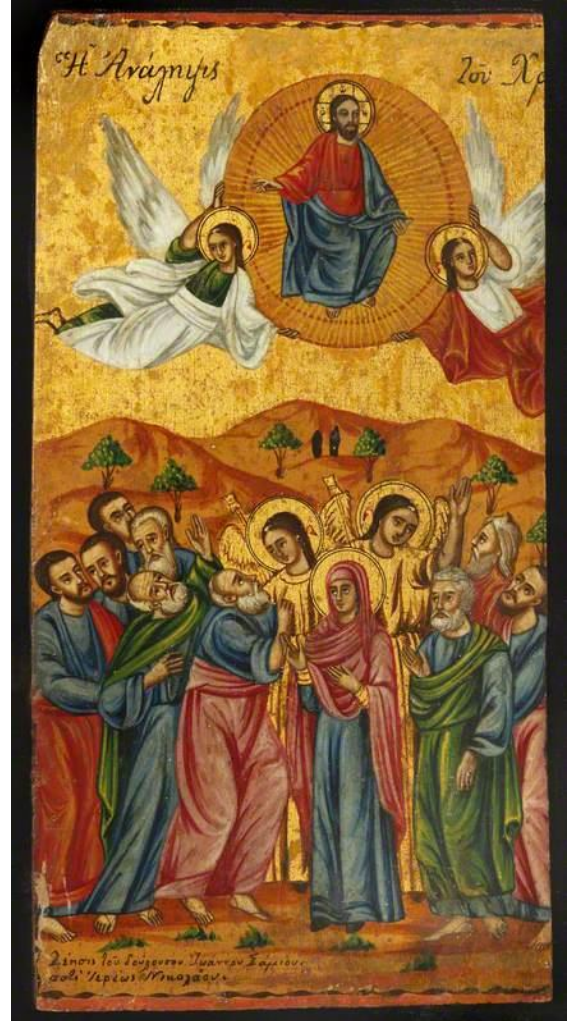


RISEN

Acts 1:13 "Then (the apostles) returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James, son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas, son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. . ."



The Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus is one of the best-known stories in history, and it has been depicted in countless motion pictures over the years. I remember as a kid watching Victor Mature in the movie, "The Robe," and being strangely moved by it, or Jeffrey Hunter as a blue-eyed

Jesus in "The King of Kings, or Max von Sydow as Jesus in "The Greatest Story Ever Told." In seminary, I came to love Franco Zeffirelli's inspiring portrayal in "Jesus of Nazareth." Then there was Mel Gibson's brutal depiction of the "The Passion of The Christ." Now there is a new television series called "The Chosen," that's very distinctive, such that I convinced several parishioners to start watching and now they are hooked.

Nonetheless, there was a movie version from seven years ago that has generally been overlooked, that I wish to recommend to you this morning, available to stream now on Prime Video, Apple tv, and Vudu. It's called simply "Risen," and depicts the life of Jesus only from Good Friday to the Ascension, forty-three days later. And though we all know the story and have all seen it before, this version is refreshingly different, and biblically sound. "Risen" tells the story of Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection from the Roman perspective. At the center of this film is a fictional character, a Roman tribune named Clavius, portrayed by the well-known actor Joseph Fiennes, who is the narrator of the story.

In the first scene, the tribune has just entered the city of Jerusalem after his troops brutally confronted some Galilean zealots out in the countryside. Before he can even wash up, Clavius is summoned to Pilate, where servants are cleaning up broken pottery and overturned fixtures. Pilate informs the

tribune that he had been forced by a Jewish mob to crucify some religious ascetic. So Clavius is now ordered to go out and break their legs to speed up their deaths and get this all over with. Clavius arrives at the scene of the Crucifixion and orders the soldiers to break their legs. Jesus, however, appears already dead, and upon hearing the wailing of the women in the crowd, Clavius simply orders one of his soldiers to pierce Jesus' side with a lance, just to be sure that he is really dead. Clavius even rides up on his horse and looks into the dead man's vacant eyes. Jesus is clearly dead. Clavius then disperses the crowd, while the soldiers take down the bodies of the two thieves and dump them unceremoniously into a large pile of rotting earlier victims, just as Joseph of Arimathea arrives with permission to take Jesus' body away for burial.

The next day, Clavius is summoned back to Pilate, where Jewish authorities are now worried about predictions that Jesus had apparently made, that he would rise from the dead, and Clavius is ordered to go and seal the tomb, and put a guard upon it, which he does. But the next day he is summoned back to Pilate again, because the tomb is now empty!

"Risen" treats the empty tomb as a kind of crime procedural in which Clavius functions as the skeptical detective, as he tries to unravel the mystery of how the body of the crucified one has disappeared from the sealed tomb. Clavius carefully

examines the physical evidence at the grave, at the crime scene, where the ropes have not been cut, but have burst apart, and where the Roman seals that he had affixed to the ropes were melted, not broken. In the tomb is found only the neatly folded up burial linen, which shows the faint marks of the Shroud of Turin upon it. The stone that had taken 7 men to close the tomb, was now lying 100 feet away from the entrance.

First Clavius goes to question the guards, who in fear of retribution for having fallen asleep on duty, fled to the protection of the High Priest, and who were now repeating a story about how his disciples had stolen the body, though their story didn't match with the physical evidence at the scene, and was obviously contrived by the High Priest to account for the empty tomb and to quell rumors. So Clavius begins to round up suspected followers of Yeshua (which is the Aramaic form of Jesus' name), followers who are spreading these rumors that he lives and Clavius gives them the third degree. One, for example, is a blind old woman, who said that she heard Yeshua's voice on the street. But how did she know it was Yeshua, he asks? She knows voices she says. He spoke to her. Clavius soon learns the name of one of the women who discovered the empty tomb, a certain Mary Magdalene, a known woman of the streets. So, he goes to the army barracks and asks the soldiers there if any of them knew where he could find her, and a dozen hands go up

sheepishly. Bartholomew, alone among the Apostles, is finally arrested, and tells Clavius that he has seen the Risen Yeshua himself. "How can that be," asks Clavius. Bartholomew doesn't know how, but he won't recant, even under the threat of torture. Clavius slyly remembers that he didn't see Bartholomew at the Crucifixion, and yet he seems willing to endure torture rather than recant. Clavius then goes into a brutal description of the process of crucifixion, which is more than Bartholomew can bear to hear. In the end, Clavius promises to let Bartholomew go if only tells him where Yeshua's disciples are. Bartholomew agrees and whispers in his ear, 'everywhere.' 'They are everywhere.'

Bodies from recent graves in Jerusalem are also exhumed looking for the marks of the crucified one on any of them, but with no luck. Informants are then bribed for more leads as Clavius tries to track down the rest of the 12 Apostles, meanwhile doors are being kicked in by Roman soldiers like an invading SWAT team, as Clavius turns Jerusalem upside down, and yet the mystery only deepens. It is as Mary Magdalene had warned him, "You look for something you will never find."

The Director here wonderfully meshes this modern police-story perspective with traditional biblical elements, from the depiction of Yeshua on the cross to his appearance on the shores of the Sea of Galilee before the ecstatic Apostles, and does all this in a way that is respectful, while skillfully avoiding the

kind of sanctimony or piety that too often characterizes biblical epics.

Clavius' skepticism finally turns to bafflement, when on spying Mary Magdalene at the door of an upper room, he bursts through, and finally finds the Apostles gathered around a table, along with the risen Yeshua. Clavius' is simply paralyzed with confusion at the sight, collapsing in a corner saying, 'how can this be?', over and over again. Just then, the Apostle Thomas enters the room, apologizing for being absent the week before, while Yeshua then shows him the wounds on his hands and in his side. This cannot be, Clavius keeps saying as he witnesses all this. And then, like in the Resurrection appearance on the Road to Emmaus, Yeshua suddenly disappears in their midst. The Apostles are confused and they all look to Peter, who is just as puzzled as they are, and doesn't know what this means, or when or even whether, they will see Yeshua again.

Then Mary Magdalene remembers that at the empty tomb, Yeshua said he would meet the disciples in Galilee, so they all pack up and head home, only Clavius now follows them from a distance. As they wander aimlessly along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Clavius asks Peter why they are waiting here. Because this is where he first called us, he replied. But Yeshua doesn't show, and the disciples get hungry, and decide to go out in the boat and fish. They fish all night long but without any luck,

and then the next morning a man walking along with shore greets them and tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat, and they gather in a great haul of fish, and on the shore, they have breakfast with the risen Yeshua, just as in the Scriptures. At the very end, Yeshua doesn't quite ascend into heaven, so much so as he simply walks into the rising morning sun on the horizon and disappears, promising to be with them always. The disciples then head back to Jerusalem to wait for some kind of promised spirit, but Clavius cannot return there, because he had abandoned his military post in pursuing this mystery. At the end, Clavius tells all this story to an innkeeper, who asks whether he is then a believer or not. Clavius replies, "I believe . . . that I can never be the same."

What I really liked about the film is that Clavius and the disciples don't really understand what's going on, or what they should do next. They are somewhat lost. At one point, Clavius asks Bartholomew, did they know this would happen, that he would be resurrected? Bartholomew answers that Yeshua told them, but they didn't really believe him, that they didn't understand. This is a biblical feature film that is less preachy, less stuffy, and more entertaining than most. The film avoids wide swaths of dogma to create this theological detective story. And the sure-handed script is laced with gladiator-style battles, a dash of biting humor, and a pinch of sensibility.

"The Nazarene. Did you find him . . . different?" Pontius Pilate asks Clavius early on in the film. "I found him dead," is Clavius' curt response. Pilate is mostly worried about an upcoming visit by the Emperor, and all he wants to do is quiet any tensions in the street. A crucified prophet gone missing is the last thing anyone needs right now. "Without a corpse to prove he's dead, we have a potential Messiah," warns Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest.

However, this does not appear to be some great conspiracy by his disciples, as the Jewish leaders suggest, for Yeshua's disciples themselves seem totally unprepared for this event and unbelieving of it as it unfolds. They weren't looking for the resurrection; they were hiding behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. What happened that first Easter so long ago was completely unexpected, as the women came to the tomb not looking for some promised Resurrection, but to finish the burial preparations that had been hurried on Friday night before the Sabbath. Every one of the disciples who saw the Empty Tomb, thought first, like Clavius, that the grave had been robbed, not that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It was a mystery, and the disciples telling of those stories are themselves evidence of the unexpectedness of Jesus' resurrection, and thus perhaps of its truth.

There is total confusion in the retelling of this story in the Scriptures, except for one fact, one undeniable fact, namely, that God did something very powerful and very unexpected that first Easter, that God raised Jesus from the dead, in some fashion or another, even though so many are left wondering like Clavius, "How can this be?" At one point, Pilate asked Clavius what he longs for in retirement, and Clavius fittingly responds wearily: "A day without death." Isn't that what we celebrate on Easter. A day without death. Those early Christians, just like Christians today, will often disagree amongst themselves about what the facts are, and will often disagree with each other about what it all means. But because of the witness of those unsuspecting disciples, and others like them, we all can remain united as Christians, I believe, in asserting in our faith in God's mysterious power, and affirming that there is more to life than meets the eye, and that by following in the way of Jesus, we can partake of that eternal life, as we proclaim boldly in faith: Alleluia. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed.

AMEN.