

THE PREDICTIONS OF THE PASSION



John 20:1 "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So, she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'"

On Palm Sunday I preached about how Jesus' actions this week, the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the cleansing of the temple, the public dispute in the Temple Courtyard with the religious rulers, the preplanned and arranged Last Supper, all reminded me of the demonstrations I watched growing up on the nightly news of the Civil Rights Movement, and how those non-violent public

political actions most often ended with decisively violent reactions by the authorities. So then, did Jesus know how all this would turn out in the end? For the Gospel writers tell us on three separate occasions that before arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus told his disciples plainly that the Son of Man must suffer many things, that he would be delivered to the chief priests and the 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? Those predictions seem to me to be a bit too specific, seemed to be more 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. Did Jesus really predict all this so accurately and in such detail? For the actions of his followers on Easter Sunday would clearly suggest to me, otherwise.

There had been trouble before when Jesus and his disciples went up to Jerusalem, as I mentioned last week. 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 at least twice

before they had so contrived, we are told (Jn. 5.18, 11.53). Thus, it would not be surprising that Jesus had anticipated some 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 those details to his disciples beforehand? I do not think so.

To begin with, the disciples seemed surprised by his arrest, and they all forsook Jesus and fled (Mk. 14.50). Shortly thereafter Peter himself 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 hanged himself, while all the others hid behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. And then none of Jesus' 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 Passover Sabbath approached. 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 all 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. 28.8-9). 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 saw and believed," but we are told that he said nothing to anyone (Jn. 20.9). 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 Mary Magdelene 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 back 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 them (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 terrified 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 frightened 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 three times 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.

Thus, what happened that first Easter morning so long ago was totally unexpected, I believe. It was an unforeseen epiphany of the power of God. It was a great bewildering experience, and the disciples' confusing retelling of that great mystery is itself evidence of its unexpectedness, I believe. 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 adds Joanna and suggests that they were other women present too. 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 (16.7), but in Luke's version (24.36), they see him in Jerusalem. There is a 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 dead in some fashion or another, and 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 can all remain united on this day in asserting God's mysterious power and the fact that Jesus was alive again. 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.