

At the crossroads ... where death meets resurrection

Lesson: **Matthew 27:57-28:10; Isaiah 43:10-21**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2027:57-28:10;%20Isaiah%2043:10-21>

For the record: it was just as unbelievable in the first century as it is now. We like to think that maybe they were naïve. Or they didn't have real science. Or they believed in miracles and we don't. But let's not kid ourselves: people 2,000 years ago may not have known about E. coli and black holes, but they knew what dead was. They really knew what dead was.

They had taken Jesus' lifeless, bloodied body off the cross, carried it to a rocky wall, and laid it in a tomb. They had spread pounds of spices all over it, to help speed the decomposition. They had moved a heavy rock to seal his body inside.

We try to sanitize death – to keep it at a distance, to forget it happens – but the first followers of the Way of Jesus lived with death. And they had watched him die, and had buried him. So let us not kid ourselves: For those who had known the living, laughing, loving Jesus, there was absolutely no doubt that he was dead. Even though he had said he would return, believing that he could be truly alive again was an enormous act of faith for the first disciples.

Who knows how many of them really did believe that he could be alive again?

Scripture tells us that when those guards who had been posted at the tomb saw the angel and discovered Jesus had been raised, they told their superiors. Their superiors bribed them to lie about what they had seen. Those guards, those eyewitnesses, spread the word that nothing important had taken place – that the body had merely been stolen.

Two thousand years later, though there were other eyewitnesses to these events, though Jesus appeared to hundreds of people, in the flesh, after his resurrection, though people wrote down their experiences, though people have been experiencing Jesus Christ every day for 2,000 years since then, it is still much easier to believe the lie.

It is much easier to believe that Jesus did not live again – that death is permanent. It is much easier to believe that there is no hope of new life for him, or for us.

It is easier to succumb to disappointment despair and death than admit the possibility of the miraculous, the unbelievable, the startling and stupendous.

The tragic fact is that plenty of us who call ourselves Christians, who have been following the Way of Jesus for days or decades, still doubt. It just seems too outlandish to believe! Life and death follow certain patterns, don't they? And many of us refuse to accept even the possibility that we might be wrong about that. We would rather live in the security of certainty than admit the possibility of eternity.

What would it mean for you if what you knew about death – death of the body, death of the soul, death of your own spirit in the present world – was wrong?

What would it mean for you to not fear death, to believe in the unlikely, to trust that you could have a real life, a better life, an eternal life? What kind of life, right here, right now, might you live?

What would your life be like if you really believed?

When the angel appeared to the women at the tomb and told them to go tell about Jesus' resurrection, they did it. And here's what the gospel writer Matthew says: they left the tomb quickly with fear and with great joy. They left quickly with fear and with great joy.

The women who had witnessed the resurrection — the women who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' conquering of death — left the tomb with fear. They saw death overpowered by God, and they left the open tomb with fear. They are not alone, are they? We are terrified to leave the tomb, too. We know what the tomb is like. We may not like the tomb, but the tomb is familiar, and certain.

We are used to our tombs. We are used to lives filled with being busy for the sake of being busy. We are used to being convinced that the more and newer stuff we have, the better. We are used to hanging on to "what might have been if only". We are used to the gnawing pain of guilt or shame. We are used to feeling insufficient and inept.

The truth is that you can get used to anything if you live with it long enough. It's scary to leave whatever you're used to. It's terrifying to walk away from certainty, even the certainty that something is terribly wrong. When the women went to Jesus' tomb, they knew what to expect. They lived with death. They were certain and secure. Despairing, but certain. But God defied their expectations by rolling away that rock. And when the women left the tomb, they were afraid.

And when the women left the tomb, Matthew tells us, they didn't just leave with fear: they left with great joy. Not just joy: great joy. Stupendous joy. Unbelievable joy. Joy is a strange feeling — it's a gift, not a result. Joy isn't logical. Joy isn't founded in certainty. Joy isn't based on prior and perfect knowledge. Joy isn't based on outcomes, metrics, achievements, sales, acquisitions, or successes. Joy is the upswelling of awe and gratitude in the face of a miracle. When the women experienced the opening of the tomb, when they witnessed new life, when they apprehended that death could not contain Jesus, they were afraid — and they experienced a great upswelling of awe and gratitude in the face of that miracle. They experienced great joy — and they ran to tell others.

Of course, when they got to the other disciples, no one believed them at first. They had seen a great thing: they had perceived a miracle. They had experienced joy. They had seen the conquering of death. And no one believed them. They probably felt like fools.

And now, for 2,000 years, people have been telling you about the changes in their lives that come with experiencing Christ. It's quite possible you still haven't believed them. Maybe new life for you doesn't make sense. It's not logical. Maybe new life for you makes you uncertain, and out of control. Maybe you're afraid of being called a fool.

Let's admit it: people who don't do what the culture tells them to do look foolish. If you give away money, you look foolish. If you don't enroll your kid in every enrichment opportunity available, you look foolish. If you read a Bible on the airplane, you look foolish. If you tell people you believe in miracles, you look foolish. If you vote against your own self-interest so that others can have more, you look foolish. If you take a job that's "beneath" you to be with your family, you look foolish. No one wants to look foolish. But if you believe in the possibility — no, the reliability — of new life, if you live a countercultural life, if you walk in the Way of the One who really knew what it was like to live and die and then really, truly live, you're going to look foolish. Not smart. Not logical. Not certain. Not holy. Foolish.

Here's the God's honest truth, my brothers and sisters: if you choose a real life, a life of meaning, love, forgiveness, hope, and community — if you choose a real life of extravagant joy, passionate faith, loving respect, deep connectedness, intentional growth, and shared laughter — you're going to look foolish.

You're going to be afraid. You're not going to feel in control, or certain. You're not going to know what to expect.

But it's going to be an adventure.

And you're going to know joy, and peace, and hope.

At the crossroads between humanity and divinity, between death and resurrection, lies the heart of Jesus. At the crossroads lies a choice: whether to remain in the certainty and supremacy of death, or to step out into the joyous adventure of abundant life.

My brothers and my sisters, I believe that God brought you here for one reason today: to hear the good news of real life, of a life at the crossroads of death and resurrection where the heart of Jesus is. I believe that God knew you needed to hear this message: that God so loved the world that God gave God's son — God's own self in flesh — so that whosoever — anyone, no matter how broken, no matter how flawed, no matter how troubled, no matter how laden down with mistakes and error — whosoever believed in this good news of new life would not only not perish, but have abundant life.

How do you get that life? You get it through relationship (not occasional nods of the head, not passing acquaintance) with Jesus Christ and with others who are following his Way. You get it by following with others. Have you ever learned how to do something really well? You probably did it by watching someone else and practicing, practicing, practicing. And at some point, if you wanted to master it, you had to stop doing it alone.

To get that life — a life of meaning, peace, joy, laughter, connection, fulfillment, forgiveness, and hope — you need to step out of and away from your tomb, swallow your pride and fear, and follow with others. Jesus came to open your tomb, and to set you free from all things that keep you stuck, all the things that trap you. Habits, hurts, history, all the things that mess up your life. God wants to open your tomb and give you a life of true freedom.

So you might be asking: if I accept this life, what do I do with the old life — the overburdened yet undernourishing life?

The Bible says to put that old life to death. Bury it. Give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. Don't try to hold on to the old life that had all the worry and guilt and bitterness and no purpose. Don't hang on to that ratty, tired old thing that's wearing you down and keeping you from being the glorious, beloved child of God you were created to be. In Isaiah, God says, "do not remember the former things; I am doing a new thing — do you not perceive it?" It's time to get a new thing for yourself, for your family.

Have you ever seen the makeover show "What Not To Wear?" The first thing the experts do is throw away the clothes that don't fit anymore, complement or improve the person. It's time to bury that old life, that old way of being that doesn't fit you any more, and certainly doesn't improve you. (I mean, if your old life were really working for you, you wouldn't be thinking about this right now.) Jesus says, "That old life, the one that had no meaning or purpose in it and you were frustrated all the time, just bury it. Let it go. Let it die. I'm giving you a brand new life."

Jesus gave a symbol for this. It's called baptism. The way they used to do it in Bible times, and still do it in many churches, was to go down to a river, dunk a person completely under water, and then bring them back up. It's about being washed, but it's also about coming up out of death. Adult baptism, believer baptism means, "I'm burying my old life, the life of false certainty, the life of pretend control. I'm burying the life that was stuck, the life that was guilty, the life that was ashamed. And I'm coming up out of the tomb, and I'm living a brand new life. I am allowing myself to be changed."

You may have come to Easter service today a little tired, a little worn out. You may be on the edge. You may have felt like giving up. Don't do it. Don't give up. Look up. Look up to God. And give in to the new life, the unbelievable, illogical, ridiculous, foolish, joyful new life you can have on a daily basis through the power of the eternal and everliving, everloving God.

Can you see it? Can you see what lies beyond your fear, beyond your tomb? Even a glimmer? Then accept it. It's a gift to you. Even you.

If you want to bury your old life and start again, on this day of new life we call Easter, if you want to be baptized, come on up. Come on up while we're starting the prayer. You can help pray, and we'll baptize you after the prayer.

Here's a prayer you can pray to begin the better life. You can pray it every day, every hour, every time you need to step out of your fear and away from your tomb. You don't have to pray it aloud, though that can help. God will hear it. God knows what you need, and God knows your heart. Here it is: God, I know you love even me. I want to start living in your way. I've tried my way. I want to live your way.

First, I'm going to pray for you then you can follow me in a prayer.

Creator, Mother, Father God, there are people here today who are just stuck. They know about you. They believe in you, but they don't really believe in new life. They are afraid, or haven't really known your joy. I pray that you would give them the courage to open their heart and their mind and life to you right now, and to walk out of their tomb.

Now join in with me:

Dear God, I want a real life. I want to be free. I want to know I'm valuable. I want to be of value to others. God, I know you love even me. I want to start living in your way. I've tried my way. I want to live your way. I'm going to let you guide me out of death into life, starting right now. Amen.