

Great Vigil of Easter
March 30, 2013
St. Andrew's Anglican Church
Luke 24:1-12

A homily preached by the Reverend James J. Popham

Why are we here? It's a rhetorical question. We are here because around 2000 years ago something rather unusual and unexpected happened. We heard one account of that event tonight in the Gospel according to Luke. A prophet and teacher and healer from Nazareth named Jesus had been crucified. He had died – what a surprise –, hurriedly buried, and left in an unused tomb owned by a prominent Arimathean named Joseph. But to the amazement of Jesus' friends, his body was not in the tomb when his woman friends arrived that Sunday morning with spices to complete the burial process by anointing the body. We all know the story. And we believe it. We believe it is essentially factual. That it is true. That the tomb was empty. But that is not why we are here. Not because we believe the story. We are here because Jesus was raised from the dead. Whether we or our friends and neighbours believe it or not. That's plainly irrelevant.

This hardly is to say that our belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ not arbitrary or fanciful. Eyewitnesses saw the empty tomb. Eyewitnesses saw Jesus after the resurrection. Eyewitnesses walked and ate with Jesus, who appeared not as an ethereal ghost, but as an embodied and very much alive human being. Their accounts withstood the test of time – and persecution. How many of Jesus' followers surrendered their lives rather than deny the truth of the resurrection? How many lions were saved from starvation by faithful followers of Christ? So these accounts were remembered and recited, recalled and rehearsed, and committed to writing and vetted and redacted and ultimately canonized in a collection of writings we call the Bible. But, again, just because we see the resurrection as actuality is not the point.

What if Jesus had not been raised from the dead? What if the resurrection were a convenient myth for some early church planters or just a fairy tale? Would we still be here? Would there be at St. Andrew's? Would there be an Anglican communion? Would there be any true followers of Christ around? Sure this Galilean prophet and teacher still might have some fans among obscure Jewish and Muslim theologians. But billions of professed followers and institutional churches with ordained ministers and hierarchies and big buildings and small buildings? We know the answer. We know we would not be here. Unless Jesus, indeed, was the Christ, the anointed one, who was raised from the dead.

And what would be our understanding of God had Jesus just been another prophet who ran afoul of Roman intolerance for political instability? From the Hebrew Bible, what would have been the entire Bible to Jesus, we would have come to understand in the creation stories that God was the creator of the world, that God had a vision for the world that was good, and that the

various writers who wrote and compiled the creation stories had a keen appreciation of scientific knowledge – as it existed in ancient times when everyone was certain that the earth was flat and surrounded above and below by water, and protected by a great solid dome in the sky. We would have learned from the story of Noah and the flood that God became disgusted with creation, but refused to give up on it. God even conceded that we might eat meat, though at the cost of animals' approaching us with suspicion, to say the least. But mainly God promised to remain faithful to God's creation and never to give up on it again. And, indeed, in the seminal event of the Hebrew people and their religion, the deliverance from the Egyptians at the crossing of the Red Sea, we come to understand that God is more powerful than any army or king, even Pharaoh's, and that God's power ultimately trumps the power of human governments. And in the powerful and pointed prophecies of Baruch and Ezekiel, we would have learned God's wisdom was expressed to us in Torah, the law, and that God even could bring life to dry bones. There would be no adversity even as great as the exile, for example, that God would be incapable of setting right. God always could be counted on to restore God's people to their greatness. God, therefore, was the source of all hope.

Now that's not such a bad God to place one's trust in. Creative, visionary, committed, faithful, powerful, wise, and life-giving. A God who always could be counted on to come to the rescue of God's people. A God whose promises could be trusted. Our Jewish brothers and sisters understand this God of the Hebrew Bible, this God Before Easter, and we might pause before we gainsay their theology. The Hebrew Bible was Jesus' Bible, and it still speaks great truth.

So what did the resurrection of Christ mean? Why is it so significant? Is this God after Easter so strikingly different from the God of the Hebrew Bible?

Yet we are here today in a church that is one of many thousands of churches that celebrate Easter as the most important holy day of the church year – even eclipsing Christmas, though I dare say a rabbit who leaves baskets of chocolate eggs is no match for a jolly gift giver who relies on eight reindeer to propel his sleigh and who at least is based on an actual saint.

Did God raise Jesus from the dead just so his followers would be inspired to organize and institutionalize the expression of their faith in a church? No doubt we are here tonight because the resurrection of Jesus was a verifiable, historical event. And it was the event that that launched the church and institutionalized the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets in the teaching, vision, and wisdom of Jesus, the Christ.

The recent television series called "The Bible" on the History Channel has drawn large audiences – and a fair amount of criticism. For example, one critic has wondered why the resemblance between the black Satan figure and Barack Obama somehow escaped the producer's attention until after the show was broadcast.... Indeed. But this same critic also faulted the series for

.... focusing on the final stage of the Bible story, which is Christ's appearance... It's all a buildup to that. They take a celebrity approach to The Bible, and highlight the figures people know and present them in ways that make it seem that when you get to Jesus, you'll feel that this was how it was meant to be all along.¹

Pardon my descent into modern vernacular, but "duh."

God knew that, as accurate and comprehensive as our theology might have been before Christ, we would need to know something more. And Jesus would be the one to show us. And how would Jesus show us? By the resurrection, his being raised from the dead *on the third day*. Now in Jesus' time on earth, many Jews held firmly to a belief in the afterlife. But what they envisioned was a general resurrection of the dead and day of judgment at the end of time. So what was startling about the resurrection of Jesus, what prompted the disciples to consider it an "idle tale," was the fact that Jesus had been raised from the dead only a few days after his death. That just did not fit their understanding of God's vision for humanity.

And what does the resurrection of Jesus tell us, what did it add to their understanding? Well, perhaps, that their creative, visionary, faithful, committed, powerful, wise, and life-giving, God, in sending Jesus to walk among us to show us the way the live according to the Law and the prophets, and raising Jesus from the dead, was, indeed, creative, visionary, faithful, committed, powerful, wise, and life-giving.

But the true addition to our knowledge was not really a better understanding of God. What the resurrection of Jesus reveals to us is a better understanding of ourselves, a greater clarity of what it means to be human.

What the resurrection of Jesus, as fully human as he was divine, demonstrates for us as humans is our immortality. That we will be raised. That life after death is no convenient delusion or wishful fantasy. Our earthly death is not the end, and God wanted us to know, to reassure us, to offer us hope.

Maybe as followers of Christ, we have taken that for granted for most or all of our lives. But it is as profound a question as can be asked, even as we thankfully depart the strident demands of modernity for the more receptive posture of post-modernity.

Let me tell you what I have discovered in browsing the Calgary Public Library selection of ebooks online. For most popular books, three or four people may be in the holding queue to check out an electronic copy. But for books about life after death and near death or temporary death experiences, the queue usually is 15 to 20 people long. People are not just curious. They long and

¹ "One Scholar Takes Issue with the 'The Bible': 5 Things the Series Got Wrong," NBCNews.com, March 29, 2013 (<http://theclicker.today.com/news/2013/03/29/17492225-one-scholar-takes-issue-with-the-bible-5-things-the-series-got-wrong?lite>), accessed March 30, 2013.

yearn to know whether our brief sojourn on earth is all there is. Or is there something more.

The resurrection answers that question definitively. There is something more. In the late 19th century a French woman by the name of Gabriel Bossis heard the voice of Christ and, as Christ had instructed her, wrote down what she heard. Her writings of Christ's words are compiled and translated in a book called *He and I*.² Here is what Jesus told her about the resurrection:

I rose from the dead for you. Not for My glory, but so that you might believe and live in the hope of your own resurrection.³

So that we might believe. So that we might hope for our own resurrection.

What did the dying Jesus tell the repentant thief on the cross next to him? "Today, you will be with me in paradise."⁴

May we never consider the resurrection and its promise to us an idle tale. And like Jesus' disciples that Sunday morning 2000 years ago, may we always be amazed.

Amen.

² Gabriel Bossis, *He and I*, Pauline Books & Media, 2013. iBooks.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Luke 23:43 (NRSV).