IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS: ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

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Luke 24:1-12

March 27, 2016 Easter North Scottsdale UMC

# SETTING THE CONTEXT

 Over the last six weeks, we have walked in the footsteps of Jesus. We’ve moved across Israel starting in the south along the banks of the Jordon River where Jesus was baptized and into the Judean wilderness where he was tempted. Then we moved with him north to the region of the Sea of Galilee where he healed people, taught God’s vision for humanity and the world, where he calmed chaos for his disciples and challenged them by communing with outsiders and outcasts. We traveled with him south to Jerusalem where we walked with him through his final week – a week that started with cheering, excitement and praise and progressed to opposition, betrayal, humiliation, torture and death. Luke has Jesus using his final breath to choose faith over fear. “Father, into your hands I entrust my life.” (Luke 23:46) This journey seemed to be over ending in shock, despair and fear for the disciples.

A dissenter on the council that ordered Jesus’ death, Joseph of Arimathea, took Jesus’ body off the cross and quickly wrapped it and placed it into his own tomb. [We go over this part of the story so quickly most of the time, but I want to dig in just a little deeper. Joseph could easily be lumped in with the people who plotted against Jesus, but when Jesus and his disciples were at the lowest, when it looked like all their hopes and dreams were destroyed he stepped in. At this terrible moment, he acted with incredible grace and generosity. The Jewish faith had very strict rules that everything had a place and things outside their proper place were unclean, forbidden or outcast. One purity rule was that all people sharing a tomb had to be of the same family so when Joseph of Arimathea put Jesus in his tomb, he gave it away. This would have been a very expensive thing to give away. His wife was probably not happy! Throughout the Mediterranean world, burial was one of the strongest obligations of family members.[[1]](#endnote-1) Interesting isn’t it that at the beginning of Jesus’ life a Joseph stepped up to be a surrogate father and at the end of his life another Joseph did the same thing. The name Joseph means “he shall add or increase.” In Jesus own beginnings and endings, we see that through him things will change. Starting with Joseph but continuing on, the concept of family was increased– who is my mother, my brother, my sister? Those who do the will of God are my mother, my brother, my sister. The ending of one definition of family becomes the beginning of a much larger extended family. The family of Christ has always been about character and commitment over bloodlines and heritage. And the story of Christ always included surprising twists.

 With these things in mind,] we join the disciples at their lowest moment of defeat; Christ has died, Christ is buried.

Read Luke 24:1-12

# THE SERMON

 Life has a lot of endings, doesn’t it? This week, I visited with a family in a hospice unit. Their wife and mother‘s life was ending very soon. It was a very painful and sad time for them. And yet because of what this day represents, because they have placed their trust in Jesus, they anticipate that she will move from this life to a new life in a radically different and new way. Her ending leads to a beginning. On that same day, I went to see Katie, Pastor David’s wife, as she waited for the birth of their son, Finn. Their life as a couple with no children was coming to an end for as most parents have experienced once a baby comes, life is never the same. Even as it was hard for them to imagine what he would be like, in a short time, they won’t be able to imagine life without him. The ending leads to a beginning- the beginning of parenthood, a larger family, a new life. **In a life full of endings, the hope of Easter has a powerful draw for in resurrection, endings become beginnings**.

 This reading is the first episode in Luke’s account of the resurrection. The rest of the story includes Jesus’ appearance to his followers in two different settings and the account of his blessing and departure. We will reflect upon his post-resurrection sightings in the coming weeks. The women came to finish what Joseph of Arimathea started – preparing Jesus’ body for burial. When they approached the tomb, they found the stone was rolled away. Think about it the stone wasn’t rolled away for Jesus to get out, was it? The Scripture tells us that he walked through walls during his appearances after the resurrection, he didn’t need the stone rolled away; it was rolled away for us. **It was rolled away for his followers then and his followers now so that we can see that endings can become beginnings**. When we left the disciples at the end of this reading, things are still confused. The women have told this unbelievable tale about an empty tomb and men in gleaming clothing. They were all reminded of Jesus telling them that he would be crucified and that he would rise again. I love Peter. Even though it sounded outrageous, Peter went to check it out. He ran to the tomb open to a possibility, not really sure, wondering what was going on. Curiosity can lead us to new beginnings, can’t it? Some of you here today may be curious about Jesus or about the church. Checking it out, leaning in to have a look for yourself opens you to the mystery and joy of perhaps meeting the risen Christ in an unexpected way.

 Faith finally came when the disciples encountered the risen Christ themselves. The witness and faith of the women prepared them. It opened the possibility to them that there was more to the story, but it took their personal experience for them to accept the hope of Easter. **The process seemed to be they were prepared by the witness of the women, had an experience of the risen Christ, they remembered what they had been told and taught before and they came to understand their faith and life itself in a new way- they embraced Jesus’ resurrection and the hope that comes with it**. [[2]](#endnote-2)

 Don’t we still go through that same process today? **If we are willing, we hear the witness and faith of those who believe, but it takes an experience of the risen Christ to move from our heads into our hearts. As we test his teachings and promises, our faith or trust deepens and we discover that our experiences of him are not so different from witnesses who have gone before us. We begin to see his teachings in new and deeper ways – we find comfort from them and challenge from them as we try to live them in our everyday lives. As we go through this process over time, we begin to see the world differently.** We begin to trust that in our ending there will be a beginning; we claim the hope of Easter. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “take up your cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9: 23) This implies that resurrection is also a daily or at least regular experience. How have you experienced resurrection in your life?

 As we walk in the footsteps of Jesus, we encounter life in its many shades of joy and sorrow. As we walk in his footsteps, we experience the faithfulness of God even in the really hard times. **We discover that tombs become wombs of new life, endings bring new beginnings.** And the circle of life continues, Easter hope lives. I invite you to walk in Jesus’ footsteps not just today but every day, to listen to the witness of those who have already seen the empty tomb, to open yourself to the risen Christ so that you too will experience Easter hope and endings becoming beginnings.

Let us pray.

*We thank you, Redeeming God, for the glorious message that you bring new hope out of despair, resurrection out of defeat, and new life out of death. You take endings and create beginnings. We bring before you the dead and dried-out places in our lives, places of endings that through your touch we may discover newness of life finding a beginning.*

*Gracious God, we thank you that you walk beside us as we journey through life. Because you are with us, we accept each new day, with its joys and sorrows, as a gift.*

*Because you are with us, we gain courage to meet the challenge of the day, choosing hope and not despair as we move through time. As you raised Jesus from the dead, raise us to new life day by day. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

1. Bruce Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh. “Textual Notes: Luke 24:1-12.” *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992,), p. 410.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gregory A. Robbins. “Exegetical Perspective on Luke 24:1-12.” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* Year C Vol. 2. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 353. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Modified from “A Pastoral Prayer for Eastertide” in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship.* Edited by Ruth Duck & Maren Tirabassi. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)