

Rev. Dr. Jim Gill

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"Final Arrangements"

Luke 24:1-12 Acts 10:34-43 I Corinthians 15:19-26

On February 27th 1991, a mother in Kansas was doing what she always did on a day, when the phone rang. It was bad news. Her son, Private First Class Clayton Carpenter, had stepped on a landmine in the Persian Gulf War and was dead. She was shocked and grief stricken. She was angry. People tried to comfort her but it was of no use. Her loss was too great. Her son would never come home again.

Three days later, she received another phone call. The voice on the other end said, "Mum it's me Clayton, I'm alive!" At first she couldn't believe it was the voice of her 23 year-old son over whom she had mourned for nearly three days. She said, "I laughed, I cried, I jumped up and down. I was overjoyed! You just don't know how much. My son, whom I thought was dead, is really alive."

We can only try to imagine what it must have been like for this mother as her tears of grief and loss are turned into tears of unbelievable joy and happiness. What must it be like to be told that a person whom you believed to be dead in actual fact was alive? She didn't have to make those final arrangements.

Today we are celebrating what is the most important day of the year for us. Today we are celebrating the fact that someone who *really* DID die but really did come alive again.

It was Good Friday and I got a call from Earthman's Rest Haven in North Houston. They called me because my parents are buried there and we have two plots beside them. The woman on the other end of the phone was calling to see when it would be convenient for me to come in and discuss my final arrangements. I said, "Not today." She followed with, "What about next week?" I said, "I'll be busy then too." She followed with, "What would be a good time for me to call you again?" I said, "I'll call you." She said, "O.K." (finally) ... I know that I need to make my final arrangements. I just wasn't ready to do it on Good Friday.

We gather here this morning to celebrate that Jesus' arrangements were not final.

It took a while for Abraham Lincoln's arrangements to be final. Six men nearly succeeded in stealing his body in order to hold it for ransom. They were leaving the tomb with his body when a custodian frightened them away. Lincoln's body was hidden under a pile of scrap lumber in a cellar during the next two years. They kept moving his body...17 times. Finally in 1901, the casket was locked in a steel cage and buried in solid cement ten feet below the floor of the mausoleum in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois. No one is stealing that body!

Jesus' body wasn't moved. It wasn't stolen. If it had been you can bet that it would have been recovered by those who opposed him. Those that moved to have Jesus killed had to settle for bribing the guards to tell that Jesus' body had been stolen ... even though to

do so would have issued a warrant their own death for losing a dead body on their watch. However they escaped that fate. The guards needed to be kept alive to be to continue to spread the lie.

From Luke's account we don't know exactly how many women went to the tomb that morning. We only have the names of Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James, but there were other women as well. They were the first to hear from the two men in dazzling white that Jesus had risen. They ran to find the disciples to tell them the news. But how do the disciples respond? They dismiss the stunning news as "an idle tale"

According to Dr. Jeffrey K. London, Pastor of John Knox Presbyterian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma what they really said was, "That's a bunch of B.S." He wrote that the Bible translations try hard to soften it by saying "these words seemed to them an idle tale" or "empty talk," or "a silly story," or "a foolish yarn," or "utter nonsense— But in reality the word in question is as offensive as it is vulgar. The Greek word is leiros, and it means "B.S." (after all 4 of the 12 were sailors)

This is the only occurrence of this word in the entire New Testament and Luke uses it for shock value. Plain and simple, it is a vulgar and offensive term, but that's precisely the contrast Luke is trying to forge. The women are the first to proclaim the Good News of the resurrection and their proclamation is greeted by a worldly response: "Leiros!"

Logic says, "If I could see Jesus in his resurrected form I would believe." But that's not what we get. The fact of the matter is, that's not even what the women got at the empty tomb. They didn't see Jesus at that point. They were told by two men in dazzling white that Jesus had risen.. What they got is no different than what we get — a word, a message, a testimony, good news, someone else's word for it.

Maybe it's not logic that guides our belief or our unbelief for that matter. Let's remember, unbelief does not mean people believe in nothing. Rather, it means that they believe in something else; they put their faith in something else.¹

March was not only when March Madness took place. It was also Women's History Month. So I want to take some time to laud these women. These women were not only witnesses to history, they went forth and "made history" by telling what they witnessed. Throughout Luke's gospel, women are positive witnesses, persons of genuine piety. It is only because they stayed near the cross until Jesus' body was removed that the women knew exactly where he was laid to rest. (The men had run away.) It is only because they obediently observed the Sabbath that they wait and arrive at the tomb on the appropriate "third day." It is only because they are filled with the joy of the good news of the Resurrection that they become not only the first witnesses to Jesus' escape from the tomb, but the first proclaimers of the gospel.

Still, there are some who just cannot wrap their heads around the resurrection. It's just too fantastic. It's too other-worldly. Jesus' best friends, the ones he'd told about his

death and resurrection, the ones who'd witnessed miracles, didn't believe it enough to even check out the women's story...

There was one exception: Peter. We're not told that he believed or didn't believe, we're simply told that upon hearing what the women had to say, he "got up and ran to the tomb. When he got there, he stooped and looked in and saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he departed to his home, wondering what had happened." We don't know what Peter believed at that point. It just said that he was amazed.

Both Luke and John comment on the condition of the grave clothes in the tomb. They found the linen wrapping sheets still in place with the cloth that covered the face folded to the side. Evidently the resins had hardened into the shape of Jesus' body, leaving the appearance of a cocoon after the butterfly has escaped. How do you explain that? Grave robbers would have taken the body without unwrapping it OR they would have unwrapped it and thrown the winding sheets to the side. No one steals a body and then rewraps the grave clothes in the shape of the person that used to be inside them. I believe that when Jesus rose from the dead he passed right through the grave clothes leaving behind the linen wrappings just as Peter found them. The stone was rolled away not so Jesus could get out, but so that Peter and John and Mary could get in and see that he had gotten out...that he had risen.

Amazing! What has amazed you? What is amazing you? We've heard the story so many times that we can have a tendency to become numb to the amazing ramifications of what actually took place.

James A. Harnish tells the story of a little boy who was "not exactly happy about going to church on Easter Sunday morning. His new shoes were too tight, his tie pinched his neck and the weather was just too beautiful to be cooped up inside.

... As he sulked in the back seat, his parents heard him mutter: 'I don't know why we have to go to church on Easter, anyway; they keep telling the same old story and it always comes out the same in the end.'"

It seems to me that amazement is maybe the first step toward believing. As we get older we seem to lose our sense of amazement. We become more jaded, fewer and fewer things amaze us. I mean, can you think of one thing that happened this last week that truly amazed you?

Why do I believe that he is risen? I believe in resurrection because somebody told me about it. Somebody told me about it because Mary Magdalene told Peter. Peter told somebody about it. At one point 500 people experienced the risen Christ and they told somebody about it.

A first year student in a Catholic seminary was told by the dean that he should plan to preach the sermon in chapel the following day. He had never preached a sermon before, he was nervous and afraid, and he stayed up all night, but in the morning, he didn't have a sermon. He stood in the pulpit, looked out at his classmates and said "Do

you know what I am going to say?" All of them shook their heads "no" and he said "Neither do I. The service has ended. Go in peace."

The dean was not happy. "I'll give you another chance tomorrow, and you had better have a sermon." Again he stayed up all night; and again he couldn't come up with a sermon. Next morning, he stood in the pulpit and asked "Do you know what I am going to say?" The students all nodded their heads "yes." "Then there is no reason to tell you" he said. "The service has ended. Go in peace."

Now the dean was angry. "I'll give you one more chance; if you don't have a sermon tomorrow, you will be asked to leave the seminary." Again, no sermon came. He stood in the pulpit the next day and asked "Do you know what I am going to say?" Half of the students nodded "yes" and the other half shook their heads "no." The student preacher then announced "Those who know, tell those who don't know. The service has ended. Go in peace."

The seminary dean walked over to the student, put his arm over the student's shoulders, and said "Those who know, tell those who don't know. Today, the gospel has been proclaimed." 2

The truth of the matter is that most of what we know is simply because somebody told us about it. On July 20 many will celebrate the 50th anniversary of putting a man on the moon. How do you know that a man has walked on the moon? Were you standing there to meet him when he stepped off? No you believe it because someone told you about it. Yet, there are people to this day who insist that it was all done in a fake TV studio down in Hollywood. Last year I saw the movie First Man by Stephen Spielberg. I definitely KNOW that Spielberg faked the Moon Landing for his movie. He didn't take his production crew to the actual moon to film it on location.

Jesus friend Lazarus was resuscitated. After 4 days of his final arrangements Jesus brought him back. He had to have someone upwrap him. But Lazarus died again and stayed that way. Private First Class Clayton Carpenter was reported to have died, but eventually he did die and did have final arrangements made. Jesus, however was resurrected with a new body that rose through his wrappings and passed through closed doors but could cook and eat fish. All that talk of heavenly banquets has promise!

I cannot explain the resurrection, I can only proclaim it. To proclaim the resurrection is to risk belief in the God we know most fully through Jesus Christ. It is to believe in the very God who raised Jesus from death to life so that we might come to live free from fear, to live full and forgiven lives, to live into hope. It is to believe that Jesus lives and through the Holy Spirit's power is picking up where he left off and using us to do it.

Jesus healed the sick. He put people in their right minds. He turned the tables on those who were taking advantage of others. He loved those who were deemed unlovable. He proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of

sight to the blind, and to free the oppressed and for us to take up where he left off so that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

The message of Easter leads us to doubt our doubts, by watering the seeds of faith. Scripture defines faith as a gift from God; it is the "assurance of things hoped for, proof of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1.) It is this gift of faith that boldly calls us to dare to look beyond the horizon of what we think we know, what we're certain of, and all that logic dictates and say, "Well, what if? What if it is true? What if it is not leiros?"

When I get around to Earthman's Rest haven to make my final arrangements they won't be my final ones... either... I've made other arrangements. Jesus has promised that he has gone to prepare a place for me and I've made arrangements to join him and all those who have gone before me because... He is risen! He is risen indeed! Those will be my ... final arrangements.

1. Dr. Jeffrey K. London, pastor of John Knox Presbyterian in Tulsa, OK.
2. ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc. , Four Truths and a Lie , by Steven Molin

I promised to finish quoting the poem written by my seminary classmate.

Easter Thoughts 1973—Darrell Cluck

God borrowed a body to become one with us.
On a borrowed beast he rode to a borrowed room
Where he broke the borrowed bread and served the borrowed wine
Borrowing condemnation from ones on borrowed time.

He bowed his head and borrowed death.

They wrapped him in borrowed linens and laid him in a borrowed tomb.
The loan was paid in three days.

He was alive, the tomb intact. He was alive, busy paying back his debts.

To the beast he gave the dignity of usefulness
To the room immortal fame.
To the bread a new purpose
To the wine a new design.
To the linens he gave the glow of glory
To the ones condemned another chance
To the tomb he gave a song of victory
To death....a dance.

Let's pray. Gracious and loving God, as we have journeyed with Jesus on this last week of his earthly life we pray that we will continue with him. We pray that we will follow closely, listen attentively and remember all he has told, taught and shown us. Even when deny and flee, fear and hide, doubt and dismiss call forth from us the gifts you have given us and help us to share them boldly. Help us to rely on the Holy Spirit as we prepare and preside, preach and teach, pray and proclaim. Give us the words you would have us speak and the strength to do so with conviction. Grant us audacious courage and abiding faith, trusting that you will take what we offer, bless and use it.

Lord we bless you for the testimony and the faithfulness of these women. They ministered to you in your time of trial and would not desert you when you were forsaken. They remind us that we should not doubt your love. May our overflowing joy and gratitude be evident and as unstoppable as we celebrate the new life we have through Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose name we make our prayer. Amen.