

## **Luke 24:1-12**

The whole world changed early on a Sunday morning. Jesus had been buried hastily on Friday evening. The normal work of preparing a body for burial, anointing it with various oils and spices, was not done at that time. The Sabbath began at sundown, and that kind of work was not allowed on the Sabbath. So the women prepared what they could and went to the tomb early on Sunday morning.

They find the stone rolled away. The tombs the Jewish people used at this time were family tombs. They would find a natural cave or carve one out of the soft limestone. In the front of the tomb were several large shelves where bodies were placed. A year later, they would return and gather the bones and place those in a small box, which would go back on one of the shelves in back of the tomb. This way, they could bury many generations in the same tomb. The entrance to the tomb was sealed with a large rock, carved into a disk, which ran in a groove.

The women probably assumed that the grave had been desecrated by Jesus' enemies. Grave-robbing was not a common occurrence in Jewish communities. First of all, they didn't bury the bodies with valuables, as some cultures did. Second, there was a great respect for the body in Jewish culture. Perhaps his enemies stole his body to deny him the decency of a proper burial, they might have thought.

The tomb is empty. All the gospels attest to an empty grave. It is a key fact of the gospel message. Frequently, the empty grave is a first target of skeptics. Some have said, "The disciples stole the body," or "The women went to the wrong tomb," or something similar. But as important as the empty tomb is, it is not the key moment of the story. The empty grave points forward to the resurrection appearances and it is incomplete without them. An empty grave could be explained away, but not the resurrection appearances.

Two angels appear to the women. Luke describes them as, "Men in radiant clothing," a frequent way in which angels appeared. There are Old Testament instances of angels appearing in this way, and by the time of Jesus, this was the expectation in Jewish culture. All the gospels agree that there were angels at the tomb when the women arrived to relay the news that Jesus had risen.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He told you that he would be betrayed to death and then rise from the dead." Yes, Jesus told them this many times, if you read through the Gospels. But it is obvious that they did not "get the message!" They weren't able to receive this word from Jesus, and the most obvious reason why is that it defied their expectations of the Messiah. Messiah was to be a victorious

conqueror. For him to die meant that he was not the Messiah. How could they conceive of a Messiah rising from the dead if they couldn't conceive of a Messiah dying in the first place? My guess is on that Sunday morning they were immensely disappointed that Jesus was NOT the Messiah. If you go a little further in Luke 24, when the risen Christ encounters two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and they don't recognize him, he asks why they are so distraught. They answer, "Because Jesus of Nazareth is dead and we THOUGHT he was the Messiah." So no doubt they were disappointed he was not who they thought he was. Still, they loved him and wanted to honor him at his burial.

But finally, they are able to remember and acknowledge that Jesus predicted his death, burial, and resurrection. And they rush to tell the rest of his disciples.

There's a great irony in these women being the first witnesses of the resurrection. In first century Jewish culture, women were considered too unreliable to be witnesses. A woman's testimony in court was not admissible as evidence, unless it was corroborated by the testimony of a man. But God chooses them to be the first witnesses. God chooses the things the world considers foolish to shame those who think themselves wise.

True to form, their story sounds like nonsense to the male disciples. The Greek word used to describe their report was used for things like incoherent babbling, delusion, and fevered rantings. They don't believe it. Nonetheless, Peter goes to investigate the empty tomb. But he only leaves confused.

But we know where the story goes from there. Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen Christ. Then Peter sees him. Two disciples meet him on the road to Emmaus. They rush back to tell the others, and Jesus appears to all of them, except Thomas. Finally, Thomas sees and believes the following Sunday.

The resurrection makes Christianity unique. Many religions follow the teachings of a person from the distant past. But we serve a living Savior, not a dead teacher. We don't just study his words and ideas. We don't just study him as a historical figure. We meet him as a living Lord. We have relationship with him.

This means that Bible study is incomplete without prayer. It's not just learning his words; it's also talking to him. Personal encounter is an essential of our faith. Reading his word is incomplete without taking the time to learn his will and do his will for us right now. We don't just learn about him; we meet him. He is not just an example to emulate in our lives; he is a Lord to serve.

The resurrection also means that the ultimate proof of the gospel message is not an empty tomb, as important as it is. The ultimate proof is encounter with the living Christ. Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the rest of the disciples all had encounters with the living Christ. But those encounters didn't stop when Jesus ascended back into heaven. One of the best known encounters with the living Christ, Paul on the road to Damascus, happened about five years after the Ascension.

And encounters with the living Christ still happen. They happen because every believer has the Holy Spirit in them. And the Spirit brings the presence of the living Christ into our lives. Romans 8 says, "You have the Spirit of God, which is the Spirit of Christ, and Christ lives in you." The Church is the Body of Christ, the visible manifestation of Christ in the world today. The world sees Christ in us. Or at least they should!

It begs the question, "Does the world see Christ alive in the Church?" Does the world see Christ acting in and through the Church? Is God's work being done by the Church? Are we doing the works of love, justice, compassion, mercy, healing, and reconciliation that Jesus would have us do?

Are God's people alive? I got to be honest and say that I've set foot in a church or two in my life where the question "Are these people alive?" was at the very least in doubt! Maybe you have, too! The angels asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The world won't see the living Christ if God's people are not alive with the joy and purpose God gives his people!