

ACTS 3:11-19 (p. 884)

APRIL 18, 2021

LUKE 24:36-48 (p. 859)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Make the words of our mouths Lord, and the meditations of our hearts, pleasing in your sight. Open our eyes to your Presence. Unlock our minds to your Truth. And unbind our hearts, so that we may fully receive your Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen!

INTRODUCTION TO 2ND LESSON

Our lesson today begins with the phrase, “While they were still talking about this”. It’s important then, to understand what has previously taken place. So, let me fill in some background.

Early on the first day of the week, Easter Morning, Mary Magdalene went to the Tomb to anoint Jesus’ body, and found that the stone covering the entrance had been rolled away. The guards were quaking in fear, remember? Two Angels appeared to Mary—Angels whose appearance was “like lightning”, we’re told, and whose clothes were as “white as snow”. And they asked her, “Why are you looking or the living among the dead?” Mary, and the women with her, went back to tell the others. Peter and John-Mark then went running back to the Tomb themselves, only to discover it empty. They saw the burial cloth and the linen! Mary talked with the Risen Jesus herself after that. Two other believers, Cleopas and an unnamed friend, took off for a nearby city. Only on the way, the Risen Jesus met with them as well! They didn’t recognize Him at first. Later though, as they broke bread together, Jesus opened their eyes to the truth! So, they immediately headed back to Jerusalem.

They found the Eleven locked away in fear, and yet talking about how the Risen Jesus had appeared to Mary. So, these two started to share what had happened to them as well, on the Road, and at the Table! And while they were still talking about all this, Jesus came and stood among them! He invited them to touch Him! Which I think is really an important key! “Touch me and see,” says the Lord! And then He offered them His Peace!

Read Luke 24:36-48

“HIDING OUT”

“You are witnesses of these things”! Only the Disciples are hiding out! What do we do with that? There is an old legend that says when Jesus ascended into Heaven, the Angels asked Him if He had completed His earthly assignment. “Yes,” He answered. “Has the whole world heard the Good News then,” they asked? “No,” said Jesus, “not yet.” “Then what’s the plan?” Jesus replied, “I’ve left a group of men and women with clear instructions to carry the message to the entire world! The people they tell will then tell others. And they, in turn, will tell even more!” The Angles paused to contemplate this. And then asked, “What’s Plan B? You know, in case they don’t follow through?” Jesus said, “There isn’t one!”

The Disciples are holed-up, with the doors locked, because of fear. Can you imagine? Someone asked me a while back if it was difficult to preach on Easter Sunday. I’m not sure if they were asking about making it “fresh”, because it’s always the same topic? Or if it had to do with all the extra people who are often in Church that day? I don’t know if this person was a skeptic or not, or had doubts, or wondered about Angels and such? But it made me stop and think.

“No,” I thought, “Easter is pretty easy to preach! It’s the very core of the Good News! It’s not tough at all! What’s difficult, is trying to preach over the next several weeks, where all the lessons talk about the Believers either hiding out, or running away! That’s hard! The Tomb is empty! Wide open, in fact, for all to see! But the hearts of the Faithful are still Full of Themselves, and Closed to the Truth! How is that Good News?”

It’s Sunday at dusk. Easter evening. And just this morning Jesus rose from the dead! You know what happened! We all know what happened! Pastor David talked about it last week! We’ve heard the eyewitness reports ourselves, just like the early Disciples! The Tomb is empty! It’s a miracle! In fact, the first miracle of Easter!

Peter and John-Mark, along with several women, have seen it for themselves! Mary, a trusted friend and colleague has personally spoken with the Risen Lord! There were Angels, remember, heavenly messengers from God! The facts are clear! And yet, for some reason, the Followers of Jesus are still hidden away!

Our readings have moved from the Gospel of John to the Gospel of Luke. But they share the same Truth! The same events, actually, with slightly different details! It’s Easter, right! John zeroes in on the fear of the Disciples, and the doubts of Thomas. Pastor David pointed out last week how we would feel exactly the same way! Whereas Luke highlights a side trip by two Disciples to the nearby town of Emmaus! Which I can’t help but see as running away! But it’s still the same day, isn’t it! And a lot has happened since dawn!

We have two different perspectives! Two different authors, with two different takes on what to share! Two different witnesses really, with slightly different thoughts on what details to write about! But both of them are talking about the Resurrection of Jesus, the Empty Tomb, the Risen Lord! And both of them, clearly describe the apprehension of the Disciples afterwards, if not the outright fear and confusion!

They are hiding out, for heaven's sake! I can't emphasize that enough! They are quaking behind locked doors, or getting out of Dodge just as fast as they can! Their emotions are a swirl of terror! I get that! They are afraid of being Crucified themselves! That's of course mixed with joy, and a healthy dose of awe and wonder! But they are not about to leave the safety of that room, are they? Would you?

Let me ask you something. If you were there, one of the Apostles, or simply part of the crowd, and you were going to write out a Gospel, your own testimony on what has taken place, what would you say? What details would you include? Which miracles would you share? What parables would you write about? What sermon points would you lift out for others to consider?

Would you emphasize the Lord's suffering on the Cross, on our behalf? Or talk about the cruelty of the Ancient Roman World? Would you highlight Jesus' ministry, what He did, right up to the Crucifixion? Or simply point to the Resurrection itself? Would you mention the burial cloth, the huge stone already rolled away, or the dumbfounded soldiers? What about the Angels who appeared, and actually talked with the Believers?

What would you write? Seriously? “Jesus has left the building”, or in this case, the Tomb? What would you say?

What I am really asking is, would you talk about the fear? Your fear? How you and the other Disciples are paralyzed? Unable to move? Would you tell folks that early on, the Church wasn't very brave? That the Followers of Jesus were all either hiding out, or running away? It does lend credibility to their witness though, doesn't it, admitting they are not perfect? I mean, the Disciples were clearly not prepared for what happened! Which is, unfortunately, not just a First Century problem! But then, how could you be?

From a medical standpoint, a body can't come back to life. Not after three days. Science requires reproducible results. And you simply cannot repeat the Resurrection! From a “religious equality” standpoint, how do you tell people that the Name of Jesus is above all other names? Let alone the only Path to Salvation! Let's face it, no one wants to admit that we will all face the Living God in Judgment someday. And atheists, those who don't even believe in God, only want to focus on the material world! How could you believe, let alone share, that the Creator of the Universe cares for us deeply, enough to step down into our world and live among us! No, the Resurrection of Jesus would send shock waves rippling through the world!

Think about it. Jesus is dead, right? He hadn't just fainted, as some skeptics try to suggest. They had scourged Him at least thirty-nine times with a whip embedded with tiny pieces of bone and stone!

That alone, according to medical experts, as well as historians, would bring anyone to the point of death! They had driven five-to-seven-inch spikes through his feet and hands! He hung on the Cross from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon! Those Crucified died of suffocation. It's grueling and graphic, and one hundred percent effective! Roman soldiers sometimes hurried the process, maybe out of pity, or most likely efficiency, by breaking the legs of the Crucified, making it even harder to breath! But there was no need! Jesus was already dead! The soldiers testified to that, remember! And these soldiers know what death looks like! But just to be overly sure, one of them drove a spear into Jesus' side, releasing a flow of blood and bodily fluid! No, Jesus was clearly dead!

They then placed His body into a Garden Tomb and sealed it up. They set guards, remember. He was in the Tomb three days! And yet, now He is here, with you, in a locked room, showing you His scars and inviting you to touch Him! He is eating with you. Broiled fish, in fact. And Ghosts don't eat. Several of your brothers and sisters have spoken with Him earlier. You have all listened to the eyewitness accounts! And now He is here! Which is when the second miracle of Easter begins to unfold!

Those frightened, terror-stricken Believers, actually decide to leave the room! That's a miracle! Imagine leaving the relative safety of the known, and stepping out, into public, after all that has happened! Imagine being filled with worry over what people will think, or what they'll do to you, and yet venturing forth anyway! Imagine not feeling qualified or trained, knowing that you do not have all the answers, and yet actually freely sharing the Gospel anyway! And with those who really need to hear it! Try to picture it.

It would be like one of us, or all of us, leaving Worship today and heading out into the streets to share the Good News of Easter! What a silly thought, right? You and me talking to total strangers about Jesus Christ—or worse, talking to our family and friends! But that’s what they did. And within just a few decades, Christianity spread throughout the entire Roman world! In fact, beyond!

Peter, and the others, have gathered in the Upper Room, maybe to discuss what has taken place, or what the fledgling Church is going to do next. They are having a Board Meeting, if you will, or a Planning Retreat, or a Visioning Conference. It’s not that different from what we do today. And don’t forget, they are sharing a Fellowship Meal! It ought to sound familiar.

Peter has just shared his discovery of the Empty Tomb. Mary has just told them of her encounter with Jesus in the Garden. And the other Disciple, the Sprinter, who ran past Peter on the way to the Tomb, has most likely shared his experience as well! Those who have witnessed the Empty Tomb themselves, and those who have spoken to the Risen Lord themselves, are sharing their experiences with others! Again, not unlike the Church today! Or, what the Church today is designed to be!

Maybe they are Worshiping in that Upper Room? Or maybe they are having a contemplative moment together? Maybe they are praising the Lord, or celebrating in prayer and song? Maybe they are just gathered together because they don’t know what else to do?

But they are together, aren't they, like we in the Church today! When suddenly the door bursts open, and in storms Cleopas and his friend!

The conversation must have exploded with emotion at that point, don't you think! I can almost hear the excitement in their voices! "Jesus spoke to us on the road! We even sat down with Him and broke bread together!" They were probably out of breath, stringing sentences together, gasping from all that running! They too have encountered the Risen Lord! And they too finally understand what all of this means! And they too feel compelled to share this Good News!

You know, my usual question is, "Where do we see ourselves in the text?" But I think a far more important question might be, "Where does Jesus want us to be?" Because I think we too have a tendency to just hide out, here in our room, in fear?

Oh, I get it! I've been dealing with periodic bouts of fear myself lately! There is a lot happening in our world right now! Just this week Iran decided to enrich Uranium so they are closer to making a Nuclear Weapon. China taunted Taiwan with a fly over of a couple of dozen planes. Russia stationed 80,000 troops on the Ukraine border. Maybe to test our resolve? Or maybe to just take over more of the world? And then there is our border! And our National Debt! And our Politicians run amuck with power! Maybe you've heard?

There was a shooting in Indianapolis, leaving 8 dead, and several injured. And another in Knoxville Tennessee. A 13-year-old boy was killed in Chicago, by the Police. And there are riots in Minneapolis and Portland because of similar incidents! Corona numbers are on the rise here in Michigan! As are the fears and divisions over what that means! But most of all, maybe like the early Disciples, I fear what will happen to the Church!

Are we hiding out, in the midst of all that's going on? Are you, personally? Because our world could clearly use a Good Dose of Hope! Are you walking an Emmaus Road maybe, carrying some burdens that are simply too much to bear? You've heard about the Empty Tomb, right? Listened to the eyewitness accounts of others! You know that Jesus has Risen, correct! You are keenly aware that Easter morning has taken place! And yet, for some reason you are completely oblivious to the Lord walking beside you? Can't you see your friend standing there next to you, reaching out His hands, inviting you to touch Him, and See?

Why do you think that is? Why do we not recognize Jesus traveling with us on the Journey of Life? Are we way too busy to pay attention, as we travel from place to place? Are we so distracted by the day-to-day to notice Him standing there? Or too engrossed with laying-out our own course to even notice Him? Might we too need to sit down in His Presence for a while, and break bread with Him, in order to actually open our eyes, as well as our hearts? Maybe we need to "Touch Him and See"! Would that be enough to make you run and tell your friends?

Are we so wrapped up in ourselves, in familiarity or fear, in our own desires, to see Jesus in our midst? I mean, why aren't we breathless with excitement, anxious even, to tell others about the Risen Christ? When was the last time you ran seven miles just to share the Good News?

Like I said, in many ways the Church today isn't all that different from the one in the days of Peter and Paul. What they faced we face as well! The same doubts exist today, and the same fears! But so do the same revelations, the same truth, the same excitement, the same encounters, and the same Power! The miracle of the Risen Christ is right here in our midst! It continues to happen! And our mission, our assignment, the reason that we exist, is identical to the one given to the early church, "Go and make Disciples"! Again, just like Pastor David reminded us last week!

In Gary Waterson's Sunday School Class, we've been talking about the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, and how they are actually a two-volume set. Both are written by the Physician Luke. And both are addressed to Theophilus, which means "God-lover," by the way. These two books are written for those who love the Lord!

Our first reading from Acts this morning, and our second reading from Luke, are just a couple of pages apart in Scripture. In time though, it's about fifty days or so from the locked Upper Room, to the witness at Solomon's Colonnade. Less than two months really! Imagine making that move!

They went from hiding, to the streets of Jerusalem, witnessing to the Gospel Truth! Peter and John went from running away, to healing a man in Jesus' Name! And then sharing with the crowd exactly what all this means! And then doing so again before the Great Sanhedrin! They boldly proclaim the predictions of the Prophets, and boldly declare the miracle of the Empty Tomb! They honestly and openly share their own personal experience of the Risen Lord! Which by the way, is how we eventually heard!

So, from where I stand, the first miracle of the Easter Resurrection is clearly Jesus leaving the Tomb, conquering Death, and stepping into our midst to share the Good News! But the second miracle of the Easter Resurrection is us leaving our room, conquering our fear, and stepping into the midst of a very troubled world to share that same Good News! Almighty God is the power behind both of these miracles, to be sure! But it takes obedience on our part, in faith, in order to make it happen! The miracle of the Easter Resurrection continues, but only if we do our part!

Christianity has never been a Buffet Line. You can't just pick and choose what parts you want, and what parts you don't. And Jesus' Great Commission to us is very clear. "Go and make Disciples," which means Followers of Jesus! But He goes on! "Go and make Disciples of all Nations, teaching them to obey everything I have told you"! And one of the things that we are commanded to do, is get up off of our Ecclesiastical Rear Ends and share the Good News!

Jesus, a little earlier said, “the fields are Ripe for the Harvest, but workers are few.”

Consider that a Job Offer! Or more accurately, a command! And Edmund Burke, an English Nobleman and Philosopher, once pointed out, “All that is necessary for evil to triumph, is for good people to do nothing!” Consider that the result, if we don’t step up!

I don’t want evil triumphing in our world! I know you don’t either! So, we simply cannot sit around and do nothing! Jesus is calling each one of us to be part of the Easter Miracle! The question is, will we do it! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Oh, Holy and loving God, we glorify your Name, today and every day. We exalt it above every other Name, in heaven and on earth, and we worship you as the Lord of our lives. We acknowledge that you are our God, and that we are your people, at least to ourselves. Now please, encourage us to do so with others as well.

Lord, we have gathered today to celebrate your Presence in our lives. We have gathered to remember your mighty acts throughout history, and to claim your promise that you will be with us as we travel into our own. Mostly though, Lord, we have gathered today to experience your Spirit, your Risen Presence right here in our midst. So please, open the eyes of our hearts right now.

Lord, you have blessed us beyond belief! You have not only given us the gift of life, but you have also given us the gift of yourself within that life. You have blessed us with food and shelter, with wisdom and health. And you have poured out blessing after blessing upon each one of us. We thank you for all of these. By far though, Lord, we thank you for the greatest gift that we have received, The gift of you, right here among us! So, we pause now, to intentionally notice, before we head back to the streets to share the Good News. Lord, you know our hearts, even better than we do. You know our cares and our concerns, our joys and our celebrations. You also know the things that will make us whole. So, each of these, we lift up before you in prayer right now. And with them, Lord, we lift up our loved ones as well. Please be with.....We trust in your wisdom and your love, Father. Therefore, in confidence and faith we place these things before you now. And in the Name of your Son, and with the prayer that He has taught us, we approach your Altar of Grace, praying, Our Father...

BENEDICTION

From Howard & Judy Ingleston

Imagine getting to heaven, and God saying this to you:

“Before I laid the foundations of the earth, I thought of you and all the days you would live. I planned out the people and the places I would give you. I laid out your neighbors and your workplace, the places you would attend school, and your family. I laid out enough days to do all the good works that I purposed for you, and I equipped you with all you would need to accomplish those purposes. I filled you with my Spirit to encourage, and remind you, and lead you. I gave you my Word so you would know me and know what to do. I gave you people to run with, and people who need me. Let’s talk about how all that went.”

May the Lord bless you mightily, as you live out God’s plan for your life!