

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE
LUKE 24:1-12

God alone knows what must have been going through the minds of those women as they approached the tomb that day. Maybe, they approached with sorrow in their hearts, choking back tears as they approached Jesus' tomb, wanting simply to honor their beloved Jesus as we honor our beloved by placing flowers on a grave. Maybe they approached with anger, thinking that it had all been a big lie- a fool's tale- that all Jesus had taught and done was lost. Maybe they approached in a depressed mood, trying not to think at all, wanting simply to get it over with, put it behind them, go home. Scripture doesn't tell us.

The truth is scripture doesn't tell us much about these women. It simply tells us that they went to the tomb, carrying spices that they had prepared. We know from studies of the Ancient World that mourning was traditionally a gesture of women. They had prepared spices and ointments on Friday, they rested on the Sabbath as the Law commanded, and then on the first day of the week, what we would call Sunday, we find them headed for the tomb.

We're told in Matthew's version of events that a large stone was rolled into place in front of the tomb and that soldiers were set to guard the tomb, so that the Disciples could not steal the body. All that we are told in Luke is that there is a stone to seal the tomb, and it has been rolled away from the tomb. Then the women went to the tomb and did not find the body of Jesus.

Now, it appears that the women were uncertain about this. One text describes them as perplexed. We can just imagine what must have been going through their minds. Where has he gone? Has someone taken him? How can the stone have been moved? If, as Matthew records, there were soldiers guarding the tomb, they might have asked the question, "How did the body get past the soldiers?"

While they were doing all of this, behold, two men appeared in gleaming clothing, but the women were afraid and bowed their faces to the ground. The men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He's not here. He has risen! Remember how he spoke to you when he was in Galilee, saying 'the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and the third day rise.'"

Think about what that means. This was no village artisan- No simple carpenter. This was no simple prophet. This was a man who experienced death only to live and rise again. What does that mean? Well, very simply it means that he is the Son of God. However, I think there is more to it than that. It means that God's work continues. It goes on. Death cannot stop it. The deceptive and devious machinations of sinful mortals cannot stop it. In short, the love and the grace and the mercy and the peace of God cannot be stopped.

As the women approach the tomb that morning, they grieve for a lost past, they grieve for a time when the Lord had been with them, moving among them, healing lepers, casting out

demons, teaching, performing miracles. They grieve for a time when God was immediately accessible to them. The carrying of spices to the tomb represents the final act of mourning when an individual died, but in this case, it has a double meaning, because not only has the person died, but seemingly so has the ministry. This is a laying to rest of that past.

But it isn't so! When they get there, they find that the tomb is empty. The present is filled with wonder, because death couldn't contain or restrain God's grace and mercy and peace. The ministry is not over- it continues! Jesus is not dead, but lives! How do they deal with this present? This is awe- inspiring! They bury their faces in fear as the men remind them of the promises made by Jesus in Galilee. Promises that though he was to be crucified by sinful men, he would yet rise again the third day. They remembered his words, and returned from the tomb, and reported these things to the eleven and to all rest- whoever all the rest were.

How did the Disciples react? Well, they refuse to believe the women- Mary Magdalene, and Joanna and Mary the Mother of James. Scripture says these words appeared nonsense to them.

You know, that doesn't surprise me. In my experience that is often what happens. When confronted by the evidence that God is alive and at work, we tend to dismiss it as nonsense. We often look at God's grace as something that happened in the past. Something that happened a long time ago. We tend to deny that God is at work in the here and the now, even when we are confronted with evidence to the contrary.

If you have ever read the book by Henry Backeby called Experiencing God, he talks about this as a crisis of belief. The early Christians lived their lives in the expectation that Jesus was coming back any minute. Because of these expectations they were able to live their lives without concern for money or status or power. But many years have gone by now- centuries, millennia. How many of us can say the same? When confronted by the wondrous evidence that God is alive and at work in our world today, we make a good showing by saying Halleluiah and lifting up praises, but then we go on living life the way we did before said that- the way we did just a few minutes before.

You know in this story only one member of the crowd, which included the eleven remaining disciples, believed. That was Peter. The very one who had denied Jesus just a few short hours before. Peter's reaction was to race to the tomb and look in, and when he looked in, he saw the linen clothes alone, and he went back to them amazed at what he had seen! He alone is willing to face that God's love and grace have triumphed.

I want you to think about something as you go forth today- Easter Sunday. If betrayal and humiliation could not stop God's love and God's grace, what could? If the principalities and powers of the day could not stop God's love and God's grace, what could? If even death itself could not stop the power of the living God, what could stop it?

If we conclude, as I have, that it can't be stopped- that God's love and grace and mercy can't be stopped- then the future is wide open! The possibilities are endless, and we can embrace that future without fear. So, how come we keep facing the future with fear? We have every reason not to.

God's love and grace were at work in the past. When Jesus walked among us. God's love and grace are at work in the present, as we celebrate a risen Jesus. They will be at work in the future as well. We remember the past by remembering Jesus' incarnation. We remember the child in the manger. We remember the stories of his miracles and his teaching. We remember the present by celebrating an empty tomb, despite the world's attempt to fill it. Finally, we remember the promise for the future that empty tomb represents- a world in which God's love and grace know no limits.