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## **Born Again to a Living Hope**

### **Luke 24:1-12, I Peter 1:3-5**

Dr. William P. Seel  
Easley Presbyterian Church  
Easley, South Carolina

To me, one of the most compelling and authentic aspects of the resurrection stories is how confused and chaotic they are. It's as if the gospel writers had tried to capture exactly what that day had been like, exactly the range of emotions they had felt – as opposed to a cleaned-up, stylized account. They see the risen Jesus and yet how could it really be Jesus that they are seeing. They believe and yet they can't see how it could be true. Matthew records that even after the disciples had spent a good deal of time with the risen Jesus, even after they had placed their hands in His side and seen the wounds in His hands and feet, even as He was ascending bodily into heaven before their very eyes – still, writes Matthew, still some doubted.<sup>1</sup> Which strikes me as just about the way we would respond were someone we know to come back from the dead.

But, more to the point, it clearly took a little while for the disciples to process and comprehend what had happened in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. By Pentecost, clearly, they no longer have any doubts whatsoever about what they had witnessed – that Jesus really had appeared to them alive again after His death on the cross. But even assured that Jesus really had risen from the dead, still it took them even a little longer to work out exactly what Jesus' resurrection meant – for them and for us all. This morning, we read one of the best and most succinct summaries of the conclusions they came to – one of the best and clearest statements of what Jesus' resurrection means for our living, as well as for our dying.

Peter begins with praise, as should any discussion of the resurrection: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!”* From there, he then lists three basic meanings of Jesus' resurrection for our faith. Meaning number one of the resurrection, for Peter and for us: *“According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”* In the cross of Jesus Christ, our past is dealt with, forgiven, and our sins are washed away. But in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, says Peter, something more happens: we are given the chance to begin anew, to start over, to enter into a new, different, and better life in Jesus. The cross deals with our past; the resurrection opens the door to a new and living hope-filled future. This meaning of the resurrection of Jesus for our lives is precisely what Paul was getting at when he wrote to the Corinthians that, *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new is begun.”*<sup>2</sup>

But as beautiful as are Paul's words, probably nobody other than Peter could possibly more appreciate this new and different life meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. Before the cross, Peter had failed Jesus in every possible way – denying Him three times, abandoning Him.<sup>3</sup> But after Jesus rose again, He specifically sought out Peter. In a moment that had to be both awful and

wonderful at the same time, Jesus asked Peter three times whether or not Peter loved Him. Three times Peter answered, “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you” – three affirmations to take the place of the three denials.<sup>4</sup> And, with that, Peter understood that he was forgiven completely for what he had done. But not just forgiven for what he had done, but given a new start, with a clean slate, to serve Christ more faithfully in the future. Just as if Peter had been born again to a living hope of a future different from his past. A living hope future made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And so the resurrection of Jesus means also for us. It means for us that, in Jesus Christ, we can lay aside the wrong we have experienced or been or done in order to take hold of the good He is both calling and causing us to become. A new life. A new beginning. A new and better way of living. Pastor Mark Buchanan tells of a young woman who came to see him. To say she had a troubled past would be an understatement – an abusive childhood, coupled with an early adulthood filled with bad decisions. She was on the verge of being suicidal, telling Buchanan that she felt she simply had no future, no way to get past what her past had been and had made her to become. Buchanan, listening to her story and seeing her pain and despair, said he was overwhelmed and just kept praying silently, “Lord, what am I supposed to say to her?”

And suddenly, he said, the Lord answered that prayer. He said that God told him to tell her that, as bad and hopeless had been her past, that He, the God who loved her, had a different plan for her future. God had a plan for her for a future that would be nothing like her past. A future marked out by hope, by faith, and by love. Buchanan said to this troubled young woman that by God’s life-giving, resurrecting grace, what God wants to make happen for you matters far more than what has already happened to you. It can all be different, starting from now:

*I shared all this with that young woman, and it became manna to her too. I watched her put on the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, the oil of gladness for the ashes of sorrow. I watched her rise and greet the day as it truly was – a day the Lord had made, a day to be glad in, a day to rejoice in, a day new with mercy. And I know the unfolding of this story beyond that day: how that young woman learned to greet each day likewise, how she learned to dig always a little deeper, travel always a little farther, into the hope and the future that were hers through Christ. I know how she met a man, fell in love, married, and had children. And I know how, though some days her past mounted its best attempts to reclaim her for its own, she learned to keep taking hold of her citizenship in heaven, to nurture again and again her eager expectations, and to refuse surrender to anything less.<sup>5</sup>*

“According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” What has been is forgiven, put away, broken away from, left in the past. In order that we might then be resurrected into a new life and a new way of living, a new future, a living hope. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means for us, as it meant for Peter, the chance to start over again better.

Second meaning of Christ's resurrection for Peter and for us: *"To an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."* Here is that promise, that meaning, which we most associate with Christ's resurrection – the promise that we also will be resurrected from death in this world into the new and eternal life of the Kingdom of Heaven. Our life here on this earth is perishable – the older we grow, the more real this truth becomes. But, as Paul writes in I Corinthians 15, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the perishable shall now put on the imperishable.<sup>6</sup> Death is no longer our ending. And I love the absolute defiance against death and rejoicing in our resurrection with which Paul finishes that thought:

*Death is swallowed up in victory.  
O death, where is your victory?  
O death, where is your sting?  
Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory  
through our Lord Jesus Christ.*<sup>7</sup>

We will die – that is our mortal lot. But Jesus will raise us from death into *"a life imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."* I love that last little bit, too – *"kept in heaven for you."* Remember Jesus talking about going to prepare a place for us? A place in heaven, prepared and kept ready just for us.

And to know that promise, that assurance that we shall be raised from death by Jesus, is to possess the most powerful antidote to fear that a human being can possess. Days before his death, the late Cardinal Bernardin, who was at that time the Archbishop of Chicago, left for us a demonstration of this Easter fearlessness – a beautiful testimony to the power of this Easter faith:

*It is the first day of November, and fall is giving way to winter. Soon the trees will lose the vibrant colors of their leaves and snow will cover the ground. The earth will shut down, and people will race to and from their destinations bundled up for warmth. Chicago winters are harsh. It is a time of dying.*

*But we know that spring will soon come with all its new life and wonder.*

*It is quite clear that I will not be alive in the spring. But I will soon experience new life in a different way. Although I do not know what to expect in the afterlife, I do know that just as God has called me to serve him to the best of my ability throughout my life on earth, he is now calling me home . . .*<sup>8</sup>

*"To an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."*

*The stars shine over the earth,  
The stars shine over the sea,  
The stars look up to the mighty God,  
The stars look down on me;  
The stars will live for a million years,  
For a million years and a day,*

*But Christ and I shall live and love,  
When the stars have passed away.<sup>9</sup>*

Death has been swallowed up in victory through the resurrection of Jesus, our Lord.

Third meaning of Christ's resurrection for Peter and for us: *"Who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."* Until that day of resurrection, as we live this new life in Christ, God Himself – in all His power – is guarding our lives, guarding our journey through this world, guarding us on our path from here to heaven. Our God is watching over us in power and in love.

One of my seminary professors, Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier, told a story about sitting in class listening to a lecture by the great giant of twentieth century theology, Karl Barth. Barth was reading a passage from his magisterial and monumental work, the Church Dogmatics. All of a sudden, Dr. Achtemeier said, Barth stopped reading in the middle of a sentence. He looked up at the class, grasped a lock of his disheveled white hair, and said to the class, *"There is not a lock of the hair on my head that is not infinitely interesting to God!"<sup>10</sup>*

And the same is true of us, as Jesus Himself told us<sup>11</sup> – we, who by God's power, are being guarded through faith. Are we sinking down? His is the hand stretching forth to lift us up before we drown. Are we in despair? He is the One who meets us in the darkness with the consolation of a new hope. Are we lost? He is the way home. Are we confused? He is the truth we seek. Are we consumed by guilt? He gives us mercy. Are we just simply overwhelmed, exhausted, and worn by the way things are going, by the burdens that we bear, by the concerns that we carry? He is our strength, He is our assurance, our comfort, our power – and He gives to us His promise that we will make it through, and that life will again be good. That Jesus has risen from the dead means not only that death shall not defeat us, but also that life shall not be allowed to undo us. We are being guarded, day in and day out, by His power, His presence, and His infinite love for us. *"Who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."*

Richard Lischer, who teaches at Duke Divinity School, tells of a Sunday morning worship service right after a hurricane had come through and done a lot of damage. He said that they gathered that Sunday morning with trees still down and with the power still out – just a *"devastated little group,"* he describes them:

*Our pastor had the good sense to introduce the service by inviting anyone who wished to do so to tell a hurricane story. Now, Lutherans do not do this. But after some appropriate display of reticence, we began. Some witnesses recounted rather trivial losses, like an air conditioning unit, a favorite tree, or a few shingles, but gradually the stories gave way to something deeper. It soon became clear that we had more than a hurricane on our minds. A woman testified of a cancer she had endured; another spoke of her divorce. An old man, who was not accustomed to making speeches in church*

*(who is?), stood at his pew and there in the darkness recalled a terrible battle from World War II.*

*As Sunday mornings go, it was amazing.*

*The stories varied greatly from one another, and who could verify the accuracy of every detail? Most of them did not have happy endings, but each one mattered and made sense. Every one of the stories testified to some side of God's faithfulness. Each story seemed to say, "I waited on the Lord; so can you!" From that miscellany of stories, a shadowy figure began to emerge as if from a mist or a tomb: not one of the tellers but the Object of all our tales.*

*We are waiting for him now and for the light that only he can shed in our lives . . .*

*I wait for the Lord, and in his word do I hope.<sup>12</sup>*

*"Who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."* In his resurrection, Jesus not only overcomes our death, but overcomes anything in life that could ever possibly separate us from the love of God. We are being guarded. Even and especially in those most difficult, darkest of days – we are being guarded by the power of our God, who will not let us go.

Which means that there is really one more thing to say this Easter morning: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!"* By the resurrection of Jesus Christ, He has destroyed the power of death. By the resurrection of Jesus Christ, He is now leading us into a new life here on earth as well as into an imperishable life in heaven. And by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, He is now with us all the way, every day, to guard us until we are home.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:17.

<sup>2</sup> II Corinthians 5:17.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 22:54-62.

<sup>4</sup> John 21:15-19.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), pp. 209-210.

<sup>6</sup> I Corinthians 15:50-53.

<sup>7</sup> I Corinthians 15:54-57.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), pp. 58-59.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in James S. Steward, "He Is Able," in *The Wind of the Spirit* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), p. 167.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching as Theology and Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 10:29-31.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Lischer, "What May I Hope?" in *Just Tell the Truth: A Call to Faith, Hope, and Courage* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), pp. 55-56.