

*He Really Died—He's Really Alive*

**Luke 24:1-12**

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Do we ever get used to death? We get obsessed with it. We try to deny it or cover it up and make it seem not so bad. Sometimes, when someone dies, it makes us think about our own death. And everybody dies—if you live long enough, you will too. Death brings separation and pain and questions. No wonder we try to dress it up or deny it or cheat it or grasp even false hopes to avoid it.

One of the latest ways some people try to get around death is *cryonics*—when a body is frozen in liquid nitrogen. The hope is that someday medical technology will allow the person to be thawed out and brought to life again. When Walt Disney died, the story was that he had been frozen. That's an urban legend. Walt was really cremated. More recently, when baseball great Ted Williams died, his children disputed whether to follow his will or a later agreement he signed stating that he wanted to be cryogenically frozen.

This is not cheap. Alcor Life Extension, where Ted Williams' body is frozen, charges \$150 to sign up, \$400 a year thereafter and \$120,000 upon death. The company I looked up is slightly cheaper. On one website I saw a list of seven cryonics organizations. The number of people (and pets) who are cryonically preserved has grown significantly in recent years. A good number of people share this strange hope and are betting that scientists will one day figure out how to bring them back. One man says, "I want to live forever and cryonics is the only way" (*Homiletics* April 2003, 57, 60). One company that does cryonics says on their website that cryonics is "Your Last Best Chance for Life—and Your Family's" (<http://cryonics.org>).

Do I even need to point out that this is a false hope? It's a false hope because even if we could prolong physical life indefinitely, we could still miss out on the eternal life of God that we find in Jesus Christ. God's answer to death is not to leave Jesus, or us, on ice. Instead, God thaws us out by giving us a new kind of life—the kind of life he showed when he raised Jesus from the dead.

After Jesus died, a man named Joseph of Arimathea went to the Roman governor Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Joseph was a member of the Jewish Ruling Council, but he had not gone along with their decision to put Jesus to death. He took Jesus' body down, wrapped it and placed it in a new tomb. Some of the women who had followed Jesus saw the tomb and Jesus' body in it. That's significant. There were witnesses who knew which tomb Jesus was placed in. And, because it was a new tomb that had not been used before, Jesus' body was the only one in it. "There was no chance of a mistake, as there might have been had there been three or four bodies, at different stages of decomposition, on various shelves in a dark cave" (N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*).

Seeing the tomb's location so they could find it later, the women rested on the Sabbath. The familiar Sabbath gave them a place to stand when everything they knew was shaken and uncertain.

Jesus was dead. And for those who loved him, all was darkness. Their hearts were frozen in loss and grief and hopelessness.

Jesus was truly human. In life, he didn't slip into his "God suit" when things got tough. And in death, Jesus went down the same road every person goes. Jesus really died. He really suffered. He felt all the pain of the beatings, the thorns, the nails. He hung naked on the cross, bleeding and gasping for breath. And then he died.

He had said He was life—but He was dead. He had said He was the way—but He took the same old road every person had always traveled. He had said He was living water—but there was only a puddle left in the memory of a few people and it was soon going to evaporate in the noonday sun. He had said He was bread—but there were barely enough crumbs left to show what had been on the plate. He had said He was the light of the world—but His tomb was as dark as everyone's. He was dead. (Bob Benson, *In Quest of the Shared Life* 136)

Think of that long Sabbath—from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday and on through the darkness of Saturday night. Imagine the

disciples' sorrow, grief, fear, confusion, heaviness, darkness. I've been in a cave when the tour guide turned out all the lights to demonstrate total darkness. That must have been how their hearts felt, how the whole world seemed, with Jesus in the tomb. Jesus was dead.

Trying to deny or avoid death is not a new thing. Almost ever since Jesus died, there have been people who tried to deny the reality of his death. Some taught that Jesus was not really human, so he didn't really die—he was just kind of faking it. Someone else said that Simon of Cyrene was the one who was really crucified while Jesus got away. Others developed what was called the "swoon" theory that said Jesus passed out on the cross and later woke up and slipped away from the tomb.

But Jesus' death was real. There was no disguising it. And for his followers, Jesus' death was more than the loss of a good friend or teacher or one they hoped would be king. They had left everything to follow him and now he was dead. They had begun to know God through Jesus and now he was in a tomb. They had glimpsed eternal life in Jesus. This One who was God with them was dead. How could he die? Someone has said that the real miracle was that Jesus could die since he was God incarnate.

And if the One who had given them God's presence, the source of life, was dead, then they were as good as dead. What we call "Good Friday" was for them the last day of life as they knew it. Saturday was all darkness for them. They were hopeless. All they had was the prospect of the rest of their lives being frozen in that loss and pain and fear.

Jesus' death was also their death. Life had been taken away from them. They could no longer live; they could merely exist. Jesus was dead.

*But, "on the first day of the week, very early in the morning" the women who had followed Jesus, who saw where he was buried, went out to the tomb. They were going to honor Jesus' memory and give him the proper burial they had been unable to finish on Friday. They expected to care for Jesus' body and his tomb. They expected his body to be there. They did not expect what they found.*

*"They found the stone rolled away,  
but they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus."*

I imagine they thought something like, "Oh no! Someone stole his body. Someone violated his grave! Can't they leave him alone? Where could his body be? What happened?"

Suddenly two men, shining like lightning, stood beside them and asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" Here in the tombs is not the place to look for Jesus. Then the men (angels) told the women, "Remember how he told you in Galilee how he had to suffer and die and rise again." Then they did remember what Jesus had said.

Remembering the truth comes from hearing the truth. We can't remember what we haven't heard. That's why we preach and teach the Bible, why we keep telling this story of Jesus. So we'll be able to remember it.

Realizing the truth and experiencing it come from paying attention and observing what's going on. Nancy and I recently started reading a book called *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes* (Alexandra Horowitz). A woman in New York tells about walking around her block at different times with different people who focus on and observe different things on the same walk. We notice and experience what we pay attention to.

At staff meeting the other day we were talking about this Scripture. Walter mentioned that "perception follows knowledge." If you learn a new vocabulary word, you'll see that word in the paper that day. That's not the first time that word's been in the paper, but you notice it now. If you buy a red car, suddenly you start seeing red cars everywhere. They were always there, but you're observing them because you relate to them now.

The women at the tomb and the other disciples were experiencing something new. They had to be reminded that Jesus had talked about it. They had to learn to recognize him in this new way he is alive. But once they knew him, they couldn't help but see him again and again.

The women ran to tell the other disciples the news. Jesus is risen! He is alive! But the other disciples didn't believe the women; their words seemed like nonsense. Peter ran out to the tomb and saw that it was empty. But he went away, wondering what had happened.

Everything they had lived for was gone. Now suddenly they were told it was back. The news was too good to be true. It was totally unexpected, unlike anything they had ever seen. God's surprises can be hard to believe.

And maybe it's easier to have a dead Jesus, or at least one we can keep locked away. One writer points out how we tend to put both Jesus and ourselves on ice. We tend to freeze Jesus, thaw him out on special occasions and then slip him back in the tube—or tomb. A frozen Jesus is easier to handle than a risen Lord who makes demands on us. We also tend to stay frozen ourselves, reluctant to thaw out and serve God and others.

We can fall into the trap of putting Christ on ice because we are attracted to:

- A Jesus who taught about love, but not a Lord who commands us to love our enemies (Luke 6:27)
- A Jesus who helped the unfortunate, but not a Lord who challenges us to sell what we own and give to the poor (Lk 12:33)
- A Jesus who paid visits to the temple, but not a Lord who cleanses and reforms our traditional practices of worship and way of life (Lk 19:45-46)
- A Jesus who supported family values, but not a Lord who predicts that he will cause divisions in families (Lk 12:52-53)
- A Jesus who forgives sin, heals sickness and delivers the oppressed, but not a Lord who empowers us to do the things he did (Lk 9:1-2; 10:1-24; 24:44-49)
- A Jesus who accepted people as his disciples, but not a Lord who challenges us to walk the way of the cross, to lose our lives for his sake, and to find new life through his sacrifice (Lk 9:23-24)

And what about us? Are we Christians on ice? We don't serve a frozen Jesus. He is alive and well and moving among us. He calls us to follow him in new adventures of faith and to reproduce his presence in the world. There's no place in God's kingdom for Christians on ice. Jesus wants us to stop being God's "frozen chosen." He wants to thaw our frozen hearts and fill us with his resurrection life and power (*Homiletics* April '03, 58, 59).

The cross for the first disciples was the end of life as they knew it, the end of any life worth living. The cross for us is also an ending. We are called to die with Christ to sin and selfishness. We are plunged into that darkness where we have nothing, where our trying to live apart from God comes to an end. But for us, on this side of the resurrection, the cross is also a beginning. The cross is the entrance into the new life of resurrection and glory.

We never need to face death, or anything—our sins, fear, struggles—in the darkness and frozen despair the disciples knew before the resurrection. We can face all those things confident that Christ's life touches and transforms them and that he promises the new life he gives is everlasting.

Jesus really died. And he really is alive! Hallelujah and Amen!

Are you trying to live like Jesus' resurrection never happened? With the same darkness and fear and hopelessness the disciples had? Are you frozen in fear, despair and sin? Put your faith and trust in the living Lord and find life for death, light for your darkness, hope for your despair. Be willing to die with Christ and then come alive in new ways in Christ.

E. Stanley Jones told about an African who changed his name to "After" immediately following his conversion. He reasoned that all things were new and different and important after he met Christ, so was going to reflect that new reality in his name as well as in his thinking and his living (*A Song of Ascents* 16).

After Jesus' resurrection, after knowing the risen Lord, we can no longer be the same. We can't stay frozen in apathy, fear, selfishness, sin or even death. In Christ, we are alive with God's kind of life now and forever.