

Sunday, April 17, 2022 – “Why This Strange Gladness?”

– Bible Study & Reflection on Luke 24:1-12

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Luke 24:1-12 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women[Ⓜ] were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men[Ⓜ] said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

In his insightful book, *Resurrection Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity*, John Shelby Spong asserts that Luke's resurrection account changed the story of the empty tomb in four ways. Spong states, “First, Luke dramatically transformed the story of the empty tomb. In Mark the women found the stone rolled away but didn't bother to check the tomb any further. In Luke, by contrast, they entered the tomb, explored it, and vouched for its emptiness. For Luke that emptiness was itself a proof of resurrection Second, Luke denied the Galilean location for any part of the Easter drama. To rid himself of that tradition, Luke changed the message of the angel in Mark and the message of Jesus himself in Matthew, which directed the disciples to Galilee. It now became an angelic reminder that while Jesus was in Galilee he had told them that the resurrection would transpire. Third, in that angelic announcement Luke introduced one of his dominant theological themes – that of divine necessity. The Son of man ‘must’ be delivered, the angel said. It was a note that would be sounded again and again in Luke's drama The fourth change was in the behavior of the women . . . Luke's women returned immediately to the disciples to give them the message. The disciples were still in Jerusalem in Luke's Gospel” (Spong, pp. 77-78).

These four changes emphasize Luke's Gospel as a Gentile gospel story (a story for us) that moves beyond the boundaries of Israel and its structured understanding of the Law. A group of women are elevated and named. “Now they were actors in the drama.” The role of Jesus is no longer just the Messiah of Israel but the universal Savior of the world. This quality of God's expansive grace is emphasized in Luke's Gospel, especially to the poor, the outcast, the lost.

And so we hear once again this Easter those strange words spoken to three women by two men in a dazzling aura of light, “He is not here! He has risen!” In these familiar words our normal understanding of the triumph of death with all its biological finality is met by an impossible thought: “Something in this universe is more powerful than death!” How strange! Could it be possible? Could it even make us strangely happy or glad?

According to Luke's resurrection story, now we are the actors in the Easter drama of unending life. We hear the words, “He is not here! He has risen!” Why this strange gladness on Easter morning?! Well, it's there or at least the hint of an answer in Luke's account of three women who come to the tomb and experience their personal Easter journey of faith. For note that Luke tells us in his text that when they were confronted by the unexpected circumstance of an

empty tomb, they were puzzled . . . perplexed. The event of faith carries in its womb the reality of doubt and puzzlement. It's right there in Luke's Easter story. For, what confronts us goes beyond the categories of our present expectation.

Why this strange gladness on Easter? Could it be that there is stirring within us an energy, an awakening which does not eliminate the doubting Thomas of our inner being but which pushes us past our puzzlement?

And then in the midst of their puzzlement, the three women see a great light, and they are dazzled. Luke tells us that two men stood by them in dazzling clothes. Are they angels, a shared vision? We are not told. What we see in Luke's text is a moment of awe and bowing of their heads in fear in the presence of a light that dazzles. All moments of spiritual insight are like that. It's not so much that we have finally figured things out but rather that we feel ourselves to be inwardly in the presence of a Great Light. Again, how strange! Could it actually be possible?

So why this strange gladness on Easter morning? Simply this: There is no doubt which we bring to this Easter event which is beyond the reach of God's renewing Light. And then these two glowing figures pose a question: "Why are you seeking the living among the dead?" Puzzled by the empty tomb as we are, dazzled by the unexpected light as are we, the three tomb-drawn women are prodded to see life in an entirely different frame: life and rebirth occur while death and nothingness stares them in the face. They were prodded to leave that Garden of Dead Ends and receive God's graceful presence in the Living Christ who would continue to walk with them in the midst of life as One who is more power than death and strengthens for the continuing journey of life. Something in the universe is stronger than death – God's continuing love and presence with us. Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Happy Easter!

Pastor Greg Rupright