

## ZIONSVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REV. JIM CAPPS- MARCH 31, 2013

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### "NONSENSE OR SERENDIPITY"

#### LUKE 24:1-12

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What a glorious day! It's Easter morning, when no matter our language, nationality or religious affiliation, if we are Christians, we can say in unity, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" In keeping with tradition through the centuries, when I say, "Christ is Risen!" you respond, "He is risen!" Let's say it with passion, like we really mean it.

Ken Davis writes about a woman who looked out her window and saw her German shepherd shaking the life out of a neighbor's pet rabbit. Her family did not get along well with these neighbors, so this was going to be a disaster.

She grabbed a broom, pummeled the dog until it dropped the now extremely dead rabbit out of its mouth. She panicked. She did not know what else to do. She grabbed the rabbit, took it inside, gave it a bath, blow dried it to its original fluffiness, combed it until that rabbit was looking good, snuck it into the neighbor's yard, and propped the rabbit back up in the cage. An hour later she heard screams coming from next door. She asked her neighbor, "What's going on?" "Our rabbit! Our rabbit!" her neighbor cried. "He died two weeks ago. We buried him, and now he is back."

Pastor and author, John Ortberg connects this story to Jesus' resurrection with the following comment:

"People in the ancient world knew that dead rabbits tend to stay dead. They knew that dead rabbits tend to stay dead. A scholar by the name of N. T. Wright notes, 'There were many messianic movements in the first century. In every case, the would-be Messiah got crucified by Rome as Jesus did.' And this is what he writes: 'In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better.'"

On that first Easter morning, as the first rays of the sun broke over the horizon, the people of Jesus' day thought he was just like those other would-be messiahs. He was very much dead in a borrowed grave. People executed on a cruel, barbaric cross tended to stay dead. To think anything differently would have been considered mindless babble, idle talk, or nonsense.

Please follow along with me as I read Luke 24:1-12 and you will see how, as events unfolded, the idea of Jesus rising from death to life moved from being nonsense to serendipity.

### **IN GRIEF AND HOPELESSNESS WOMEN HURRY TO JESUS' TOMB TO FINISH EMBALMING HIS BODY. VERSES 1-3**

While all of Jesus' disciples, except young John, are not to be found, in Luke's account of the crucifixion and burial of the young Galilean Rabbi, the women are mentioned three times. In fact, it is the women who went with Joseph of Arimathea to the garden cemetery where Jesus body would be

placed in a tomb carved out of a rock. There was not time for the women to do what was necessary to prepare Jesus' body for burial before the sun went down marking the beginning of the Passover Sabbath. They would have to tenderly finish that gruesome task at sunrise on Sunday.

The grief-stricken women were right on-time, early on that morning, prepared to use their spices and perfume to give Jesus the fitting burial He so richly deserved. It was the least they could do as they considered how Jesus had treated them with the kind of dignity and respect they very seldom received. He had transformed not only their lives but the lives of women in general who would follow.

As you may know, women, whose main purpose was to serve men and bear them children, were considered little more than property. A good man in that culture would pray as he got out of bed first thing each morning, "God I am thankful that I am not a Gentile, not a slave, not a beast of burden and not a woman."

On the subject of the legacy that these women would leave, listen to these words from historian Rodney Stark as he argues that one of the reasons why Christianity spread throughout the ancient world was due to its revolutionary new attitudes towards women. He writes:

"Recent, objective evidence leaves no doubts that early Christian women did enjoy far greater equality with men than did their pagan and Jewish counterparts. A study of Christian burials in the catacombs under Rome, based on 3,733 cases, found that Christian women were nearly as likely as Christian men to be commemorated with lengthy inscriptions. This 'near equality in the commemoration of males and females is something that is peculiar to Christians, and sets them apart from the non-Christian populations of the city.' This was not only true of adults, but also of children, as Christians lamented the loss of a daughter as much as that of a son, which was especially unusual compared with other religious groups in Rome."

With all of that said, the women's greatest concern as they rushed in the predawn darkness was how they would be able to move the heavy wheel-like stone along the track on which before their very eyes had been rolled to close the opening into the tomb. When they saw the entrance open, from the first rays of sun light, the women are bewildered to say the least.

Finally as they muster up the courage to enter, they find that Jesus' body is gone. The tomb was empty. In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene cries out in a mix of righteous indignation and hopelessness, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where to where they have put Him." It is almost as if she might have been saying, "It wasn't enough that they crucified Him, now they are desecrating His body." It made no sense whatsoever to Mary and the other women. Why would anyone do such a thing?

If the truth be known, maybe some of us have come here with circumstances or situations which seem to make no sense whatsoever. With a very real and deep grief we may be asking the "why" question. Why did I get this diagnosis? Why did I lose my job? Why are my parents acting like they are? Why did she have to die? Why did he make such a bad decision?

Some of these "why" questions which make no sense from our perspective can be attributed to circumstances or the decisions and actions of people. It's also natural to query God and ask "why" God either seemed to cause something or at best allowed it to happen.

Such must have been the state of mind of the women when they saw that Jesus' body was not in the tomb.

#### **IN THE MIDST OF THEIR QUESTIONING, TWO ANGELS APPEAR TO THE WOMEN. VERSES 4-8.**

Like someone turning on a switch, "suddenly" the two men dressed in clothes that gleamed like lightening appeared to the women. Undoubtedly, we are talking about angels. The Greek word for "angel" is *angelos* which means "messenger." To be sure, these angels are the couriers of the greatest message ever communicated.

The women respond to the sudden appearance of the angels the same way everyone does in the Bible. "In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground." While I can't speak for you, I know that's exactly where I would be, especially in the early dawn setting of a cemetery.

The angel's message begins to answer their questions regarding Jesus' missing body which they had come to embalm. "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen!" Wow! What absolutely astounding news!

Before they have time to even begin to process that question and statement, the angels call them to remember that when they were with Jesus in His ministry in Galilee, He had predicted that he would be put to death and then be raised on the third day. At the time, they thought with all of the pressure from the religious leaders He had gone paranoid on them.

In a way beyond their wildest dreams, it was all beginning to make sense. Not only did it begin to make sense, but their grief and hopelessness had suddenly melted away. In a matter of just a few short moments, their world which had been shattered by the crucifixion was coming back together in a wonder-filled way they couldn't have imagined. They were moving from "no sense" to serendipity, which by the way means, "surprised by joy."

Dear friends, if you have come here this Easter morning filled with grief, hopelessness or any other emotion that is squeezing the joy and meaning out of your life, God wants to send messengers to bring life transforming news to you. Messengers can come in all shapes and sizes. While they usually aren't "two men in clothes that gleamed like lightening," they can be every bit as real and effective.

For me, the first messenger in my memory was a bus driver. As a 7-year-old, I was waiting to go to church for the first time when a bus would pick me up at a corner in the country. When the door opened, the driver greeted me with the biggest most welcoming smile. That was my first impression of God.

Another messenger was a Sunday school teacher at that little country church who also served as my first softball and basketball coach. While he may not have been the most talented teacher, he loved us and was an instrument in my coming to a personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Do you see what I am getting at? Many times we don't see or hear the messengers God has placed all around us to help us move from nonsense to serendipity. God deeply wants us to experience the joy and power of the resurrection.

Likewise, in ways we may not anticipate, God wants to use you and me to be the messengers who point grieving, hopeless people to the Risen and now Reigning Lord. As messengers, it's not our ability that is as important as our availability or willingness to be used any time God wants to use us.

It is both humbling and exhilarating when God uses you, like He did the two angels, to point grieving, hopeless people to the Risen Christ and see them begin to move from nonsense to serendipity.

**IN VERSES 9-11, THE WOMEN ARE DISRESPECTED WHEN THEY PRESENT THE SERENDIPITOUS NEWS OF THE RESURRECTION TO THE DISCIPLES.**

The women couldn't keep the news of Jesus resurrection quiet. They hurry as fast as they can to tell His disciples who are huddled in fear behind locked doors probably in the same upper room where they had shared the Passover Meal with Jesus.

The disciples who are grieving and hopeless don't believe the women. In fact, with the Greek word used here which is translated "nonsense" in the NIV, we get a strong sense of how they really felt about the women and their news. That word could be translated, "idol talk" or "babbling" which was coming from crazed or insane women.

They must have thought that these women had allowed their emotions to get the best of them and they had gone off the deep end. All but one of them completely discounted and in so doing disrespected them. The women's words were nothing more than "wishful thinking" because they couldn't accept the fact that Jesus was dead. Certainly, the Messiah could not die like that. They must have felt they had hitched their wagon to the wrong star. Now it had all exploded in their faces to the point that they must have feared for not only their own lives, but the lives of their families.

Maybe some of you may see yourselves in the disciples' response to the women. When you think of Jesus resurrection, it's just not rational. If others want to believe and it makes them feel better, that's great for them, but if you are being intellectually honest, that's a step you don't feel you can make. I've talked with several people through the years for whom that was their dilemma. The resurrection just doesn't make sense.

If, like the disciples, the resurrection seems like "Nonsense" to you this morning, please note that you're in good company. Many through the years have had a problem with the resurrection which is the foundational event of the whole Christian faith.

One such person was British journalist, Robert Morison who tried to prove that the story of Christ's resurrection was a myth. After a long and thorough scientific investigation, his probings led him to the validity of the biblical record in a moving, personal way. He wrote a book, *Who Moved the Stone?*, which gives an account of his investigation and findings.

James Singleton Copley, one of the great legal minds in British history and three times the High Chancellor of England wrote, "I know pretty well what evidence is, and I tell you, such evidence as that for the resurrection has never broken down yet."

The greatest evidence for the resurrection today is written in the lives of people like you and me whose lives have been irreversibly changed because of the work of the Risen Lord in our lives today.

If you believe that the resurrection of Jesus is idle talk, nothing more than the babblings of religious fanatics, I challenge you to do a serious investigation. But, if you are wrong, you have missed out on the greatest discovery this world has ever made.

### **IN VERSE 12, PETER RUNS TO THE EMPTY TOMB AND PONDERES THE EVIDENCE.**

We relate so well to Peter, don't we? He is impetuous and head strong and in this case, after hearing the news and seeing the women's faces, has to find out for himself. In John's Gospel, John runs ahead of him to the garden tomb where Jesus' body had been interred.

There at the tomb Peter discovers evidence of the resurrection which the women did not see in the darkness of the early dawn. There are the strips of cloth which had been tenderly wrapped around Jesus' lifeless body late on Friday afternoon. I picture them lying there in the shape of Jesus' body just as if His body but empty. It's as if in a split second the body has evaporated or been sucked out of the mummy-like covering.

At first it makes no sense. If someone had stolen His body, certainly they would not have unwrapped His decaying corpse. As He ponders the evidence, Peter's mind began to move from nonsense to serendipity. Maybe Jesus was not dead. Maybe, just maybe He had been raised from death to life just as He predicted.

The later events of that day, as well as the Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, would convince Peter that Jesus was alive. In fact, his belief was so strong that he was willing to bet his life on it. Tradition says that he was crucified upside down because of His faith in Jesus Christ. In His heart and mind the resurrection moved from being nonsense to serendipity.

### **APPLICATION**

If you have come here this Easter morning, grieving and/or feeling a sense of hopelessness, you can move from nonsense to serendipity. For the women, their experience with the angels moved them from nonsense to serendipity very quickly. For Peter, it took a little longer. For the other disciples, there were varied lengths of time. For example, it took Thomas longer than the others.

If he is not already, Jesus, the Risen Lord, wants to be your Savior. That happens as we prayerfully ask Him to forgive us for our sins and live within us by the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Where ever you go and whatever you do, He promises to bring you peace, comfort, and hope.

This same Jesus wants to be our Lord, as we day by day, hour by hour submit our lives to Him, allowing Him to guide and empower us as we travel life's journey here on this earth. There couldn't be a better day than Easter to come home to Him if you've wandered away from Him, trying to be the lord of your own life.

You may have heard of professional golfer, Paul Azinger, who was diagnosed with cancer at age 33. He had just won a PGA championship and had ten tournament victories to his credit.

He wrote, "A genuine fear came over me. I could die from cancer. Then another reality hit me even harder. I'm going to die eventually anyway, whether from cancer or something else. It's just a question of when. Everything I had accomplished in golf became meaningless to me."

Then he remembered something Larry Moody, who teaches a Bible study on tour, had said to him: “Zinger, we’re not in the land of the living going to the land of the dying. We’re in the land of the dying going to the land of the living.”

Paul Azinger recovered from chemotherapy and returned to the PGA tour. He’s done pretty well. But that bout with cancer deepened his perspective. He wrote, “I’ve made a lot of money since I’ve been on the tour, and I’ve won a lot of tournaments, but that happiness is temporary. The only way you will ever have true contentment is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I’m not saying that nothing ever bothers me and I don’t have problems, but I feel like I’ve found the answer to the six-foot hole.

“I know I’ll spend eternity with God and I have a promise—that as a child of God, He’ll help me deal with anything. He has promises to offer me contentment regardless of what life brings—even cancer.”

Because of the resurrection, each one of us can have a personal relationship with the Risen Lord. In that relationship, daily and even moment by moment, our innate hunger for the spiritual is met. Because of the resurrection, we can move from life at times to be nonsense to being serendipity, as we are continually surprised by joy.

As we think of the wonder of moving from nonsense to serendipity, in closing listen to these words by John Ortberg spoken a couple of years ago in his Easter sermon at the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church as he reflected on the difficult place we were in as a nation:

“People have not gathered for the past 2000 years to say, ‘the stock market has risen. It has risen indeed.’ They have not gathered to say, ‘The dollar has risen. It has risen indeed.’ Or, ‘that unemployment has risen.’ Or, ‘the gross domestic product has risen.’ Or, ‘General Motors has risen.’ Or, ‘the value of your 401(k) has risen.’ Here’s the one hope that has held up human beings across every continent and culture for two millennia of difficult times of poverty, disease, hardship, and death itself: ‘Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed.’” Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!