

# Good News

From the series: Faith in Jesus: Trust in God

*Text: Luke 1:1-14; Luke 24:13-17, 28-35*

Richard A. Rhem  
Christ Community Church  
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## *Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Luke 1:1-14*

*... As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked among with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. Luke 24:13-17*

*Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread. Luke 24: 28-35*

We made a move last week. Easter was the hinge. We are making a shift from our Lenten pilgrimage in which we focused on the faith *of* Jesus, an examination of those things that Jesus believed—the deep convictions of Jesus’ life that shaped the way he lived, and the message he proclaimed, and the ministry he performed. We saw that Easter, when the crucified one is brought to life by God, was an affirmation, was a confirmation of that way of Jesus—the resurrection of Jesus by the power of God. And the Christian movement understood this resurrection as God’s ‘yes’ to Jesus—as the seal of God’s approval on the way Jesus lived and what Jesus taught.

Now in the season of Eastertide, I want us to see how the Christian movement, coming out of the womb of Judaism as it did and drawing its vision from Jesus the Jew, came to define itself as having faith *in* Jesus. The difference is in the preposition. The immediate community around Jesus experienced that resurrection as “Good News,” as wonderful “Good News.” That “Good News” would eventually trigger a new genre into the literary world. The Gospels are really a literary genre of writing all their own. They are not biographies, not chronicles of the days of Jesus’ life. They are faith documents, proclamations of faith from a particular theological understanding. It is the life of Jesus seen through the lens of Easter, and it is a celebration full of joy in that triumph of the resurrection.

When those first witnesses encountered Jesus, they reached for a way to express what they sensed, felt. How were they to explain it? What *was* their experience? What do you think? How might you have described it? Here was one who had been crucified, and with the shattering of faith and all of the disappointment that surrounded the darkest of all days, this one who had been crucified was present. There was a presence, and there was a power, and it was personal, and it was Jesus. It was the one who had been crucified who they sensed was with them. How were they to explain it? They spoke of resurrection.

The idea of resurrection did not arise with Jesus' resurrection. The idea of resurrection had been in Jewish faith, at least in Pharisaic thought, for a couple of centuries. There was a growing conviction in Judaism in those centuries that God would raise the righteous, who were suffering under the heel of the oppressor. The Jewish people believed they were God's elect and chosen people, and that in their terrible sufferings God would not leave them destitute, but God would raise the righteous. In Daniel there is a statement to that effect. So the idea of resurrection was not introduced with the experience of Jesus risen from the dead.

I think often in the Christian Church we have stressed in the Easter event the empty tomb, the objectivity, the factual nature of it. Actually, to be honest, it was not that historically objective. It wasn't the kind of thing that you could demonstrate and prove. Luke starts out his Gospel by saying, "I have been aware of these things from the beginning. I have studied them very carefully, and I am going to give you an orderly account of these things. I think that we have a document whose historicity, whose reliability we can count on. Nonetheless, it is a document of faith." And as a matter of fact the appearance of Jesus was not the resuscitation of a corpse, so that you go down the street and you see somebody you haven't seen for a while. You shake hands and you say, "How nice to see you again. Hi, Jesus. Gee, I thought it was all over. How are you?" No, it wasn't that. There was something strange about it. It wasn't the resuscitation of a corpse.

I used the prophecy in Ezekiel 37 in the Easter message last week. In the valley of dry bones the Spirit of God, or the wind of God, blows across those dry bones and they begin to come together. They get sinews and flesh, and they stand up like a living army. The point of that is that it is the Breath of God. It is the Spirit of God that enlivens. It is not the fact that the dry bones actually become living again. Too many of us like to hang on to that empty tomb as if to say, "doesn't that prove it?" Too many of us cling to the empty tomb as though Jesus was laid in that tomb and three days later his corpse came to life and he walked out. Perhaps that imagery is almost inevitable. We tend to think in concrete images. And that can be misleading.

The old funeral committal liturgy – we have a new one now with which I am more comfortable – but you've probably heard these words at a grave side: "To Almighty God we commend this God's servant, looking for the general resurrection in the last day, through the Lord Jesus Christ, who's coming in

glorious majesty to judge the world..." And then this, "The earth and the sea will give up their dead." Now if you take that literally, over here in Spring Lake in the cemetery, all of a sudden, Whoosh! There they go! Or, say you are out on a Caribbean cruise and suddenly the sea at the Bermuda Triangle just kind of erupts with bodies. Is that how we must take that image, so concretely, so physically, of the resuscitation of corpses?

We do need concrete imagery. It helps us. It is really all we know. But listen to the rest of the concrete, physical descriptions in the Gospel accounts. In the Gospel, Luke for example has Jesus at one point sitting down at table and eating fish, but that probably was in order to say, "Look this wasn't a fantasy. It wasn't a phantom, a ghost." We are talking about real personal presence. On the night of Easter the disciples are behind a closed door and suddenly Jesus is there. I mean he "appears" - doors and windows are barred. How does he do this? No explanations are given. Then there is the story of the two guys walking on the Road to Emmaus and somebody joins them. They don't recognize him at first. Now please, they don't recognize Jesus? When he agrees to sit down at table with them, when he blesses the bread and breaks it and gives to them, then, says the author, "their eyes are opened." But once they recognize him in the breaking of bread - whoosh, he's gone!

The body the Gospel writers speak of is able to do things no resuscitated body could do. Whatever Luke has to say about him having a filet of halibut, he didn't need fish to sustain that spiritual body. A spiritual body. It seems a contradiction in terms and it can be confusing. The New Testament witnesses - how were they to express it? This one whom they knew to have been crucified, dead, buried, was experienced as alive, powerful, present personally. So they struggled to give witness to their conviction.

That experience finds stammering expression in the Bible, using various images and metaphors, but it breaks down when we try to use language because it is an inexpressible experience. What was their Easter faith?

It was Good News to them because it said to them that the God of Israel had said 'yes' to the Way of Jesus. They were following Jesus. They had listened. They had heard. They had heeded. They were followers of Jesus. They had come to love Jesus. Then on Good Friday it all ended in the darkness of Golgotha, and now this one who had been crucified was alive and it was Good News to them because it was a sign and seal to them that the Way of Jesus was the Way of God. It was a sign that Jesus was right, that God was like Jesus said God was. That Jesus was right over against the established religious authorities and the whole temple authority structure. Their experience of a resurrected Jesus confirmed what Jesus had promised, that God was a God of the abandoned, a God full of compassion, a God of inclusive love, the embracing of the whole world, a God who would touch and heal, a God who forgives. Not a God who was waiting for some kind of sacrifice to be made in order that God might forgive, but a God like the Old

Testament Psalmist said, “Lord, if you should mark iniquity who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you.” Jesus was right and the fact that the crucified one was raised confirmed in the hearts of his followers that Jesus was right. That was good news to them.

You know there was nothing in the faith in the risen Jesus of those early Jewish followers, those disciples that would have necessitated the breaking off of the Christian Church. In the Eastern origins of the Christian movement there was no need that it be separated from the womb of Judaism because they were in line with that strain of Phariseeism that was looking for resurrection. Jesus was a righteous one. God raised Jesus. If Peter and James had first met Jesus they would have been dumbstruck, of course. But on reflection they would have said, “Hallelujah, God raised the Kingdom. It’s true. Jesus said the Kingdom was among us. The Kingdom is here.” Now, to be sure, they didn’t expect that one would be raised; they were looking for a general resurrection. So Paul, a Jew, writing that Letter to the Corinthians says, “Jesus raised as the first fruits, but the first fruits are the first fruits of a harvest that is to follow very soon.” Obviously those Jewish believers experiencing the crucified one living, named it “resurrection” and expected the whole thing to explode very quickly. Well, it’s been 2000 years, and it didn’t happen that way. But that doesn’t take away from what their experience was of Jesus’ living presence. It was a confirmation of Jesus’ Way, and they put their faith in Jesus. Again, not faith in Jesus in place of faith in the God of Israel. It’s not as though now Jesus is God. It is that they had faith in Jesus because of the God to whom Jesus pointed them. It was simply a confirmation of the God of Israel who takes the side of the righteous, which was their deepest conviction. It was Good News for them!

But it was more than that. It also, as I concluded last week, gave them hope. It gave them hope that the world was not finally a Good Friday world, but an Easter world. As I said last week, “I would follow Jesus if Good Friday were the last chapter. I would follow Jesus if the cross were the end. I believe in Jesus’ way of being human in this world. But if that were the end, there would be no hope.” In our world especially with the media available to us, where into our living rooms and into our dens and our kitchens, pour all of the images of the anguish of the world, if I had no hope in God I would still want to follow Jesus. But I wonder if I wouldn’t run out of gas and if that would not be to live with a terrible sense of futility in the face of all that’s wrong in the world.

What’s going on in Bosnia, again this week – it seems like it is as bad as it can get, but then it gets worse. The continuing drama around the world of Palestine and Israel, and you name it, to say nothing of Los Angeles, of racism, of sexism, of homophobia, of the divisions that tear people, of the moral vigilantes that would blow up the world for the sake of their idea of God and truth. In a world of almost unrelieved tragedy, if I did not believe in Easter, I think it would be almost overwhelming when you look into the faces of the poor, of the refugee, of the

starving child, of the old woman with a babushka with marks of suffering on her visage. It would be almost too much if it were a Good Friday world, period.

The Gospel means literally Good News because God didn't leave Jesus dead; God not only said 'yes' to Jesus' Way, which I want to follow, but God also said, "Righteousness will not always be crucified. Love will not always and forever be defeated. Justice will not always be absent from the land." I don't know how. I don't know when. The images in the Bible, in the New Testament, in the Easter community are rich pictures of a day when there is a city, a new Jerusalem, and through the city there is a river of crystal and on the banks of the river are trees whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Images of a day when God will make all things new and tears will be wiped away and there will be no more pain and no more sorrow, no more death and crying. Images of an age that is ending and a new age that is being born. They are all images. They are all stammering attempts to say, "I believe in God. I believe in a God who is creator, whose breath calls the dead to life, who vindicated the way of Jesus and one day, some way, will make all things new."

That's Good News. That's the Gospel.