

Luke 24:1–12

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Resurrection of Our Lord, Year C (Revised Common Lectionary) · 22 March 2016

Happy Easter, a few days in advance. We still have Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to go, of course. And since you are all parish pastors, or most all of you, and know the rhythms of Holy Week, I bet some of you have funerals too. Dear Tim, my friend, was just telling me about two big ones he had in northern Minnesota. Death doesn't give up its grip that easily. But we rejoice in Christ Jesus and in the promise of Easter, and so we have an Easter text to work with, in preparation for a whole series of Easter texts through the season. These are some of the classic texts of the Christian year, and always a joy. So God's peace to each of you. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, for each of you, and for dear pastors who have to struggle through the week to a resurrection of their own.

So here we go. In the texts set for the main service on Easter Sunday, Christ Jesus punctures the power of death that has spread over the earth like an all-embracing membrane.

The trouble is that death takes over our imaginations. For the first two and a half or three decades of life, we live as though we were immortal, and drive that way too, I'm afraid. Death is a faraway eventuality and doesn't really matter. Life is going to go on as it has through recent years, and we will be able to continue unabated. But when death finally breaks through, when we finally realize we are mortal, when the illusion finally breaks, then death captures the imagination. And when it captures the imagination, all we can see is the looming threat ahead of us. We literally can't imagine anything sufficient to challenge the power of death. We assume, start to finish, that death is always going to get the last word, and then there is nothing to do but surrender to death and its inevitability, going glumly toward the future. The Easter message breaks into this membrane. It punctures it, to let in the air and the light, so that we can see our way forward in hope.

The supporting texts are magnificent for Easter Sunday. We begin with Isaiah 65, Isaiah again nearly ecstatic with the hope of the gospel, pouring out hope like someone splashing water on dry plants. He sings of such hope that the wolf will lie down with the lamb and the lion will eat straw like the ox: a whole change in the earthly order when death has been defeated. Then

we come to Psalm 16, which just radiates with the power of the gospel, holy mackerel, a personal statement full of faith in the power of the risen one. And then we come to 1 Corinthians 15:19–26. You will recognize that we are in the mother lode of resurrection passages when we come to 1 Corinthians 15. Here is the great apocalyptic promise: Christ is going ahead of us to put death under his feet, and we follow, each in our own order, as he asserts his power over death and brings it into subordination.

And then, for all the joy of these passages, we get one of the accounts of the empty tomb. You remember that there are two types of resurrection passages. There are the empty tomb stories, which come in a family. In these passages Christ has broken the power of death, but the shards of death hang on him. That is, the membrane has been punctured, but there is still stuff around the hole, stuff trying to contain him. In this case we get an empty tomb story that describes Christ risen by implication more than by sight. The other type are the passages in which the risen Christ appears. We'll start those next week, and we'll get a whole series of very powerful ones in which Jesus becomes manifest to faith, showing himself to his disciples and through them to all of us. So we start with the empty tomb and move on to fuller accounts of the resurrection.

Today, then, we'll take the texts for the main Easter service, the midmorning one, which probably repeats itself in the later morning for some of you. There is a wonderful text for the earlier service, what we used to call the sunrise service, where Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. I just love that. She's annoyed and a little petulant, thinks it's the gardener, and tells him she wants to be left alone so she can concentrate on her grief. And then he calls her by name. How's that? Pretty good. But we'll skip over that passage, come to this one, and follow on with further Easter texts later.

Isaiah 65: A New Heaven and a New Earth

So first of all, the supporting texts, beginning with Isaiah 65:17–25. Isaiah the prophet is the main source of Old Testament texts for the Christian church, and I suppose one of the reasons is ecstasy. When he starts to sing about the future, you can almost see Christ Jesus and hear him working it out. So here we go. "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness." How's that?

Here we get the basic discontinuity. There is a hiatus, a break, a fracture, between crucifixion and resurrection, and so we are into something new. You can't speculate about the old and build a bridge to the new from there. The old is old and the new is new. The resurrection opens the door to a new future, and thus to new conditions and a new shape of life. So resurrection is not just the resuscitation of the dead; it is an attack on the conditions and circumstances in which death rules. "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth." I'm not doing something novel in between; I am renewing the heavens and the earth, making a new heaven and a new earth.

"And the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind." They will be blown into oblivion by the new. So be glad and rejoice forever, because this new creation is exuberant with hope. It is really a description of the age of the Messiah, and everything will be new. And so he describes this newness. "I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their descendants with them."

As you read this, I expect it will come to your mind, as it came to mine, that what Isaiah is describing here is the reversal of the curse that fell on Adam and Eve in the garden. Adam: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread," with thorns and thistles. Eve: "In pain you shall bring forth children." The curse that falls on all humanity because of Adam and Eve's rebellion brings us into seasons of contradiction, where we plant but do not harvest, where we give birth but do not raise: circumstances of frustration and contradiction. Now, as the Messiah comes, as the Messiah returns, all of this is resolved.

Now there is completeness. There is creaturely fulfillment. Everything in the restored creation works exactly as it should. You give birth and you raise a child. You plant crops and you harvest. Everything is now working together for good. But watch the way this hope spills over in an absolutely beautiful image. "Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear." Here is the promise of God, ever faithful. And then this beautiful passage: "The

wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” In a renewed creation, the wolf will not be looking the lamb over for lunch. In the renewed creation, the lion will not be thinking about the ox.

And the mosquitoes will be vegetarians. You’re wonderful, Brian. And they won’t carry that Zika virus either. Anyway, here is the new creation, where predators, those who live by the death of others, are retrained and restrained. Instead of taking their life out of what they pursue, they take their life out of the soil. They eat and they graze. They are no longer carnivores tearing life from the bodies of others; they take life out of the ground, in a new peacefulness, in a new creation. “The wolf and the lamb shall graze together.” Ordinarily, if you find a wolf and a lamb together, they will not graze long. The wolf will be happy, and the lamb will find a new future in its belly. That’s the way predation works.

Once when I was in Africa (I suppose I’ve told you the story before) we came on a place where a pride of lions had killed an ox, a beautiful, big ox, as muscular as it could be. The mama lions hang right on the neck until they break it, and when the neck is broken, they all feed, viscera first. It looked like the Nestingen family at Christmas. They had been feeding all night, they had eaten the guts, and they were lying there with their bellies full. What an awesome sight. That’s the old creation. In the new creation, the lion would be inviting the lamb out to lunch, and the ox would be safe. Here is Isaiah’s beautiful promise. Only the serpent will continue to bear the curse: “Dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.” What a gorgeous vision of the future.

Psalm 16: You Will Show Me the Path of Life

Now Psalm 16 describes the hope of Easter in more personal terms. It begins with a cry for deliverance. “Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you. I have said to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord, my good above all other.’” Then follows a statement of God’s faithfulness, worked out in personal terms, which goes on for six or eight verses. “All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land, upon those who are noble among the people. But those who run after other gods shall have their troubles multiplied.” Break the First Commandment and it comes back against you. “Their libations of blood I will not offer, nor take the names of their gods upon my lips.” Faith disdains the idolatrous possibility; it holds firm in the face of it. “O Lord, you are my portion and my cup; it is you who uphold my lot. My boundaries enclose a pleasant land.” Isn’t that fun? To live in faith is to have appropriate boundaries, not always to be pushing out against them, trying to expand, but to live by hope.

“My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; indeed, I have a goodly heritage. I will bless the Lord who gives me counsel; my heart teaches me, night after night. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand I shall not fall. My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; my body also shall rest in hope.” Here are all the consequences of the resurrection. This is the hope we have in Christ Jesus. He has broken the power of death, and so we look to him as our Redeemer and can speak of him as delivering us. And so the psalm concludes, “For you will not abandon me to the grave.” That is, you will not consign me to Sheol; you will not leave me among the dead. “Nor let your holy one see the Pit.” There you go. There’s the promise of the gospel worked out in beautiful terms of assurance. We will not see the Pit. “You will show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

Faith sings this song of hope and joy in the risen one, giving thanks to God for having broken into the reign of death and provided an open door. He has punctured the membrane, and he is letting us through.

1 Corinthians 15: The Last Enemy

Now in 1 Corinthians 15 we get a taste of the Pauline apocalyptic. He is working out for us the course of things, what is going to happen as the resurrection unfolds into the future. And so he begins, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Why? Because we treat the resurrection as though it were a matter of course, or as the isolated resuscitation of a dead man, or as a myth, or as though it had no reality. We concede to the power of death. And so when we listen to the resurrection stories, we do not think of joy, of Christ’s impending victory. We start thinking about how to explain it. As Don Juel used to say about the historical method, its basic purpose is to protect us from the text, and so from the message of cross and resurrection.

If that’s all we’ve got, you might as well sit Easter out. If all you’ve got is more accounts of why Jesus isn’t raised from the dead, you might as well forget it, because you have nothing to say that’s worth hearing. But because Christ has been raised from the dead, we are not among those consigned to pity; we have been consigned to hope, and so life begins. “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” He has finally reversed the curse that sin placed on the whole human community. He has broken the bonds. Christ Jesus has pierced the membrane, so that the life constrained above now flows

through to those below and flows into all of us, and we begin to revive and come forth in newness of life.

Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the firstfruits, the first one to be raised, but we follow in our turn. We follow in a train; we are part of a procession coming out of the graveyard. I've always loved it that here in the Midwest, where the Norwegians are densest, as we like to say, we still follow the old custom of having our burial grounds around the church. That's a good place to have them, because there we can look forward to this procession of all the dead coming forth behind Christ Jesus, led out of their tombs. Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the firstfruits, and we are the fruits that follow.

"For as by a man came death." Are you thinking of the words of Handel's *Messiah*? I suppose I am too. "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead." The power of death flowed out of the disobedience of one man, Adam, into the whole human race, and it became death for all of us. He broke his alignment with the power of life and so fell under the power of death, and all the rest of us too. This is who we are, and this is where we are. We are under the power of death, and our identities are those of people who are passing on.

"For as in Adam all die," everybody consigned to the power of death, "so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Now we should take a little look at the grammar here. This is an aorist conditional construction, set up to express hope in as vibrant and personal a way as possible. This is not universalism, which declares the future resurrection already accomplished and therefore beyond doubt and beyond judgment. Paul speaks here of a future that has been won for us, but it is still ahead of us, so we can't claim it as a possession for the whole creation. It is rather a hope that has been given to all. When he uses this "all," as he does also in Philippians 2, for example, he is not speaking of a universalism that declares the hope accomplished for everyone, but of a universal hope that includes all the creatures blessed by Christ Jesus. It is a universal hope, not a universalism.

"For as in Adam all die": that much we can at least say is true. That's not a hope; that's the reality. In Adam we all die. "So also in Christ." Here is the hope and the joy, the breaking forth of the Easter trumpet, the sound of the dead being raised. "So also in Christ shall all be made alive." And we hope that for all, and leave the discernment of who to Christ Jesus.

“But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits.” There is a sequence in which this is played out. The hope is for all, for everyone; the hope is a new creation. Yet it doesn’t all come at once; there is a sequence that Paul sees unfolding. Christ the firstfruits is the one who has punctured and broken the membrane, so that life now flows through unrestrained, and when he has broken it, “then at his coming those who belong to Christ” follow. Christ knows who belongs to him. We have heard this promise, and so we dare to hope that we will be following in his strength.

“Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying.” Here is the broken continuity again. We saw it at the beginning of Isaiah’s text; here it’s even more pronounced. “After destroying every rule and every authority and power.” Those rules, those authorities, those powers have held for the time being, provisionally, but they will break and yield to the power of Christ Jesus as he establishes his rule over all things. He delivers the kingdom; he hands over his sovereignty and the fruits of his victory to the first person of the Trinity. “For he must reign.” How long? “Until he has put all his enemies under his feet.”

Death is still out there. Its back has been broken, but it still swings its tail. It can no longer make ultimate claims, but it still works in the penultimate, and it will continue to work in the penultimate until finally the ultimate comes. “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Then he will hand over the power, and then death will be no more. What a marvelous word. Death will die. No more dying, no more crying, no more loss. Death is dead; death has lost.

Luke 24: Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?

Now we come to Luke 24:1–12, and we get a picture of life and death in contention. The marvelous thing about the New Testament resurrection texts is their caution, their realistic sense of everything that impedes and threatens. As I understand it, the New Testament at its profoundest level speaks of the risen Christ appearing with his wounds. He is risen, he is risen indeed, but his wounds are still there. Death has marked him and continues to mark him. So as he brings forward the power of life, death continues to attack and restrain and hamper and hinder and cause difficulties. And so now we get the story of the resurrection, but death is still hanging around. The tomb is empty, but we don’t see him. He hasn’t yet established his identity beyond an absence.

So the empty tomb texts are texts of contention, where death and life are still wrestling. Death has lost, but it hangs around. Life has won, but death is still clinging to its heels and won’t let

go. So we get texts that bespeak the power of the new in the midst of the old, the power of the resurrection in the realm of death, bursting with hope, even though that hope is qualified by the lack of any vision. Well, hope that is seen is not hope, of course. Yet these texts have a double dimension, and we have to recognize that.

“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared.” Here we get a scene repeated all over the world, wherever it is warm, in the subtropical and tropical climates. When death comes, it comes with a threat, and that threat is the decay of the body. In the rural world, the world beyond the technology of the cities, the smell is a constant problem. If you’ve ever smelled it, you know it’s unforgettable; the smell of death remains in your nose. So the goal, in that world of warmth and the threat of early decay, is to spice the body with spices that will mask the smell. And the reason is that by the common harshness of custom, the stench is taken as evidence of sin. If you stink, you’re a sinner, and the more you stink, the more of a sinner you are. So the women come with their spices to try to control the smell, and to some extent they would be successful.

“On the first day of the week, at early dawn,” the women went to the tomb, as women have been going to tombs from time immemorial. The men are gone; the apostles are hiding someplace. They don’t want to admit their loss. They are desperate. But the women do what women have always done. They get the spices and go to the tomb to open it, so that they can minister to the body with these spices and keep the stink of putrefaction from giving Jesus away. So death has hold of their imaginations right to the bottom. What other possibility is there? Well, he said he would be raised from the dead. But of course we have lost so often, and we have lost so many, that speaking of resurrection sounds utterly foolish, and we’ll hear the disciples say exactly that. So the women are not going to the tomb singing *Te Deums* or songs of hope. They are trudging in resignation and loss. They trudge to the tomb because they have to do what they have always done: prepare the body for its decay.

“And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb.” Here is the first surprise. Tombs are not made to open. They assumed they could get somebody to help them. But here is a door standing open on the grave. That’s a kind of contradiction: graves are closed, and here is one standing open. “But when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this.” Of course they are perplexed; they have no other expectation but death. They go to the tomb not because they expect it to be open for them, but to defend Jesus and the community from rumors of his putrefaction. Now they come into the realm of

death and find an open door. That's the first surprise, but I suppose they imagine that somebody must be working in there, or somebody got there before them. There could be any number of explanations for that open door.

They go in, and now they get an even bigger surprise. The body of Jesus, a dead body, which is certainly not ambulatory, is not there. The body is missing. "They were perplexed about this." What the heck is this? What's going on in here? How are we supposed to understand this? Is it some kind of game being played with us? You can hear all kinds of reactions, some tinged with hostility, lots of them tinged with uncertainty. They don't quite know what's going on.

And so now "two men stood by them in dazzling apparel" to interpret the empty tomb. These are God's preachers, sent to declare what is going on. "And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground," for a whole number of reasons, they hear a question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" In one sense this question is full of irony. This is the human predicament. We seek the living among the dead. We seek ourselves in those who have passed. We seek ourselves in the community and in the people who have shaped us. We seek ourselves in the historical conditions of life, in what was achieved before us. We seek ourselves by studying what has gone on among the dead. We historians, of course, are always poking in the ruins; that's the nature of our calling. We seek ourselves among the dead.

But there is more than irony here. There is anticipation, because the angels remember what the women apparently, and the apostles certainly, have forgotten: that Jesus has promised to overcome the power of death. So the question is more than an ironic one for all humanity. It is a question addressed specifically to faith. Why are you here? What are you doing in the cemetery? He promised that he would be raised. "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here." That's incredible. Here is true proclamation. The angels preach a great sermon to the women. "He is not here, but has risen."

"Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and on the third day rise." This word is not an appeal, and it is certainly not an explanation. It is proclamation. It tells what has now happened to Jesus. He was put to death, and he is now risen. "And they remembered his words." His words came to mind once more. There it is: everything is in the word. "And returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest." They went

and spoke of what Christ Jesus had accomplished. He had accomplished it among the dead. He had raised the dead.

So now we have women as the first messengers of the resurrection. They are sent with this glorious news, and they are sent to the eleven. Well, they're not the twelve anymore, are they? Judas by this time has already spilled his guts in a field. It's all over with Judas, but there are eleven left, and so the women go running, looking for the eleven. You notice the eleven weren't at the grave. Maybe they were still hiding in the upper room. Anyway, they didn't see any reason to go to the grave. Expecting him to be raised from the dead? Are you kidding? That's just foolishness. So they are gathered, and these women come running in, all breathless and ecstatic with joy, full of hope. They remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven, who were hiding for fear of the Jews: to the eleven who should have been the twelve, and should have been right out there with the message.

Now we get a little honor roll. "Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them." So apparently there were more than a few: at least three, probably four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. There was a group of women, and when they became convinced of what had happened, they went running, looking for the disciples, and when they found the apostles, they told them what had happened. It was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them "who told these things to the apostles."

But now what? Here we have the first messengers of the resurrection, and what do they get for their joyous message? They get another witness to the power of death. The empty tomb is inconclusive. It still has a wrapping of death around it. The apostles are not sure at all, and so "these words seemed to them an idle tale." This is sexist in the extreme, and it's just awful. They thought it was baloney, the kind of stuff you'd hear in a beauty parlor. They thought it was nuts. Dead people don't rise, even if they say they're going to. Of course, we have a special category for people who say such things, and we are not convinced. So these hard-hearted and hardheaded disciples are stuck. The great membrane of death has wrapped their imaginations and stanching any possibility of spontaneity or joy. No miraculous outpourings here. No resurrections, thank you very much. We like the world as it is, staid and predictable and controlled, where we can count on the markets and eke out our little possibilities. Leave me alone. I don't want to hear all this nonsense. Forget it.

“These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” But now the scene shifts to Peter. Peter, who has the most to lose in the resurrection. Peter, who denied him three times, just as Jesus told him he would. Peter, who made a fool of himself. Peter the fisherman, who swung the sword, as though a fisherman were fit for military service. He went for the guy’s head and got his ear. What kind of swordsman is that? You can hardly believe it.

So what did Peter do? Well, the word got loose. Peter, like everybody else, was held by the universal assumptions of death, but Peter thinks to himself, “Well, maybe. I wonder.” And he takes off on a dead run. “But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves.” He saw the remains, the linen cloths in which Jesus had been wrapped, lying there as empty as an uninhabited suit of clothes, cloth that had lost its shape. He saw the linen cloths lying there by themselves.

And what did he do? Well, death still had him, didn’t it? “He went home marveling at what had happened.” Jesus has tackled his imagination. It’s going to get loose now. He has shown them a new possibility, one Peter never dreamed of, and now we are going to find the resurrection breaking loose. Oh, there will still be reminders of the power of death. The risen Christ will appear with his wounds, always with his wounds. He will appear as the crucified one, but as the crucified one he will now appear as the risen one. And he will appear to you too, in the sacrament, in the word. He will bring home his gifts to you, so that even held in the power of death you will taste the force and power of the resurrection. You were baptized into his death, and sharing a death like his, you share a resurrection like his.

Here we go: the fun has begun. Now the Easter hymn can break loose for joy, for joy, for joy, and the trumpet sound, because the world has turned. The resurrection has broken through the membrane of death, and life is flowing through in a marvelous stream.

God’s peace to you. Have a wonderful Easter, a joyous celebration. Eat some hot cross buns and some good ham, and rejoice in the goodness of your Creator, who loves you and has given himself for you.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1yfuV8YhI8>

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