

Easter 2025

What Really Happened?

Luke 24:1-12

April 20, 2025

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

I'd like to tell you this morning what I think *really* happened on Easter.

This is no easy question. Every Christian must wrestle with a profound mystery. We know the "right" answer is that Jesus rose from the dead. The complexity, of course, is that *that doesn't happen*. I've sat with bodies after death. Our heart stops, our breath leaves, our body stiffens, our complexion yellows. It's shocking how fast we go from a vital living being, to a life-less corpse. When that change happens, nature and science and experience all tell us: it doesn't reverse itself.

At the center of our faith is what some people might call an... *impossibility*.

You've got to wrestle with it. Some Christians browbeat us for wondering about the resurrection; they say, with the Apostle Paul, "unless Jesus was raised, all of this is in vain." But with all respect to Paul, *bless his heart*, that's just not my experience. My experience is that it's very possible to be a person who shares the love of Jesus, and doubts the resurrection. Our scriptures, far from discouraging this, actually *assume* that churches will be full of doubters—why else do we find in John old Doubting Thomas demanding to see the nail holes if he weren't "speaking up" the doubters in the church? Even better is the end of Matthew, where the resurrected Christ shows up on a mountain to his disciples; Matthew writes, "When they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted." For crying out loud, some disciples saw the Risen Christ with their own eyes and still were like, "I don't buy it." There has got to be wiggle room for those of us who have our own questions.

I say all this because I want you to know that I think there's nothing wrong or deficient with your faith if you would count yourself among the "resurrection-curious."

But I want to share with my own perspective on the truth of resurrection and how I've come to that place.

Let's remember what the gospels say happened. Each gospel is different when it comes to Easter, but the basic arc of the story goes like this: Jesus died on Friday by crucifixion. Early Sunday, women who loved Jesus went to his tomb with spices to try and tend to his dead body. When they got to the tomb, they found that the heavy stone had been moved away. Jesus' tomb was open. The women went in. The body of Jesus was not there. Perhaps they saw or heard a messenger. They left that tomb full of conflicting emotion. *Where was Jesus?*

Later that day and in the days that followed, people who loved Jesus tell us that they *met him*. Jesus talked with them. He ate fish with them. He encouraged and empowered them. He let them touch his wounds from the cross, which persisted on his body. These appearances, like the rising itself, are something I cannot explain.

What happened next was just as much a miracle as the rising and the appearances. These people who said they saw a Risen Christ then *lived as if they had done just that*. What do I mean? Every incentive in the world was for them to go back to their lives as they were before Jesus. Crucifixion was intended to silence and intimidate people into obedience. But that is not what happened. Those women and men who saw the Risen Christ kept meeting. They continued forming themselves into a Jesus-shaped community. They shared their resources with each other and with those who were poor, they showed mercy, they saw the image of God in every other human face; they loved God, and neighbor, and enemy. Theirs was a fearless life—they lived as though they knew something about this world: that the power of death is broken, that love holds all the cards, that nothing the empire could do to them would ever separate them from the love of God in Jesus. It's that life that they passed on, from that first generation through thousands more generations. A life of fearless love that has now been passed to you.

Yes, resurrection, materially speaking, is implausible. I'll never know exactly what happened on Easter morning. But I do know that that mysterious event crossed over into the realm of concrete reality in the lives of those who witnessed it. They chose the resurrected life in every moment thereafter. The truth, the power, isn't about what happened in the past. The power of the resurrection is found in the present and in the way it points you toward the future.

God raised Jesus to show that the way of Jesus is the way for all the world. Love is stronger than violence. Goodness is stronger than cruelty. Forgiveness is stronger than vengeance. Feeding people is better than watching them starve. Healing people is better than watching them suffer. Teaching people is better than letting them live in ignorance. Welcoming the stranger is better than pushing them away. The last days of Jesus' life were a confrontation between two empires—two alternative visions of power—and just when it looked like Rome had won on Friday, God said, “guess again.”

The life of Jesus is undefeatable.

You see now, I hope, why the truth of resurrection isn't found by looking back, but looking around at who we are, and looking forward into the future, to who we are becoming. We don't proclaim, “Christ was raised.” We say Christ is Risen! The undefeatable life of Christ is now found not in one Judean body, it's now a communal body, a community of people who live the resurrection every day. When this love is in you, you cannot help but look forward to the day when this love gathers us all together, to the day when life on earth is as it is in heaven.

In this particular moment, the truth of resurrection has never been more important. For a long time, our society could pretend the liberal political and economic order was bringing in God's reign, even if we had to some of its sins. Now, when the same evil powers that were in the Roman Empire—the powers of violence, cruelty, and domination—are ascendant, it is a clarifying moment for followers of Jesus. Which powers will you align yourself with? What kind of person will you be in this moment? I want to live a life of sharing, of mercy, of seeing the image of God in every face, of loving God, and neighbor, and enemy. I want to be fearless, knowing that the power of the empire and the power of death is broken. I want to live in the same way as those people who saw the Risen Christ.

There is a modern parable. It goes like this: two Christians are arguing about the resurrection. One is a conservative. He says, "Jesus was raised from the dead. It happened exactly the way the Bible says, and I believe it." The other is a liberal Christian, she says, "don't be so rigid; we can't believe in what science says is impossible—Jesus was a profound moral leader. That is enough."

A third person is listening to the two argue. They turn to her and ask, "which of us is right?"

She says, "I'm not sure what I believe about resurrection. But here's what I do know: I've never heard a story more beautiful; in my hardest moments, my body aches for it to be true; in my best moments, this story lets my spirit feel free. Because I have longed for the resurrection to be true, it is who I am."

Christ is risen. Then. Now. Forever.