

Can You Believe It?

Go back in time with me. It's Easter Sunday morning in Jerusalem, the first day of the week. The one thought to be the Messiah had been crucified on Friday, his lifeless body placed in a borrowed tomb, the rolling stone locked in place and the entrance sealed. Some women had gone to the tomb early Sunday morning to complete the burial process by covering the wrapped body with additional spices. Instead of finding the tomb sealed, the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was open and empty. Two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning appeared and spoke to them. **“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves and he went away wondering to himself what had happened.” Luke 24:5-12**

The disciples didn't believe the women because their words seemed like nonsense. It was unbelievable. They had seen Jesus raise three people from the dead, the little girl in Capernaum, the widow's son in Nain and Lazarus just a few weeks ago, but now Jesus was dead, they saw him die and knew he was buried. There was no miracle worker around to raise him from the dead. I can almost hear them saying to the ladies, “Look, we loved him too, we wanted him to be the Messiah and we know he worked miracles, but you have to accept it, it's over. Finished. We just have to find a way to move on because Jesus is dead and buried.”

Can you believe it? It's unbelievable isn't it? Luke tells us on that same day two of the disciples were walking to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. **“They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.” Luke 24:14**

Imagine the discussion they were having. “Can you believe it? Can you believe the week we've had? We started out with Jesus in Bethany a week ago, that amazing walk down the Mount of Olives with Jesus riding on a donkey's colt, just like the prophet Zechariah had predicted. The crowds greeting him with “Hosanna” and “Blessed is the king of Israel.” I mean, everything was falling into place. He had to be the Messiah. He believed it. We believed it.”

“I know and the crowd believed it too. And when we got into the city and went to the temple and he started overturning the tables of the moneychangers and told them his house was to be a house of prayer, it was like he was taking charge, exercising authority to expose the whole corrupt system that’s in place. Then he healed people and began to teach in the temple area. Everything he said pointed to the new age of God’s kingdom.”

“We were so sure, so certain he was the one. We had the Passover seder with him. The way he broke the bread and said this was his body that was given for us and then passing the cup and saying this was the new covenant established with his blood. He’s said some strange things before that were hard to understand, but we all wondered what he meant. He kept talking about giving his life and his blood, but He wasn’t supposed to die. There was too much to be done.”

“We left the upper room and followed him to his favorite meeting place over in the olive grove where he liked to go to pray. He seemed so troubled. He even said he was sorrowful to the point of death. He took Peter, James and John with him and went off at a distance to pray.”

“I figured some time in prayer would settle things for him. It always did, but then suddenly we heard the commotion, guards coming with torches burning brightly, and of all things, led by Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve! The next thing we know, Judas walks up to Jesus, kissed him and the guards seize Jesus and arrest him. They charged him with treason against Rome and blasphemy. An illegal trial is held in the night and then they took him to Pilate. Pilate sent him to Herod and Herod sent him back to Pilate. I couldn’t believe how he was beaten and that horrible crown of thorns they shoved down into his brow. I’ve never seen anyone so viciously brutalized.”

“There was nothing we could do to stop them. They led him to Golgotha, nailed him to the cross and crucified him. Even then, Jesus was still Jesus...forgiving those who had beaten him and the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. Hanging there in agony, with religious leaders mocking him, the sky turned black as night and in the darkness we heard him quoting the Scripture, “My God, why have you forsaken me.” And then, “It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” And then it was over. Silence. Silence you could not only hear, but a silence you could feel. Joseph of Arimathea had obtained permission to take the body and place it in his own unused tomb, so he and Nicodemus prepared the body and laid it in the tomb. It was unbelievable. All our hopes were wrapped up in that linen burial shroud along with him.”

“I still can’t believe it happened. The agony of Friday. The stillness of Shabbat. We all just sat in silent grief Saturday, stunned, occasionally asking, “Can you believe it? Can you believe what’s happened? How can this be? How can it end like this?”

“What about the crazy stuff we heard this morning from the women and from Peter and John? What do you think all that means? The body is gone? Do you think another miracle has happened?” “I don’t know. I can’t hardly believe it, but it is Jesus after all.”

The two disciples walk on, discussing. Luke tells us, **“As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them, but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, ‘What are you discussing together as you walk along?’ They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, ‘Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?’ ‘What things?’ he asked. ‘About Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.”** Luke 24:14-24

Jesus joins them, but they were prevented somehow from recognizing him. Perhaps they asked him that same question I’ve been asking, “Can you believe it?” Jesus then turns it around as he asks them, **“Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”** **“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”** Luke 24:26-27 Jesus is asking, “Can you two believe what the Scripture said concerning the Messiah, the Christ? Can you believe it? This is exactly what the bible said about the Messiah, that he would be wounded for your transgressions, bruised and beaten for your iniquities. Can you believe it?”

They invited this knowledgeable stranger to join them for dinner and when he took the bread in his hands and gave thanks and broke it and began to hand it to them, it was all too familiar. Luke tells us suddenly their eyes were opened and they recognized him. It was Jesus,

risen and alive that had been talking with them all this time. Just as suddenly he disappeared from their sight but they knew it had been no vision or apparition. Jesus was alive. **“They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.’ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.” Luke 24:33-35**

Can you believe it? The reports keep coming in, the evidence mounting. The women saw and heard the angels. Mary Magdalene spoke with Jesus. She thought he was the gardener but he spoke to her and told her he would meet with them. Jesus appeared to Peter and talked with him. It’s certain. He is risen. Cleopas and the other disciple tell their story of their lengthy conversation with him. Can you believe it? He’s alive. He has risen from the grave. What’s it all mean? **“While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” Luke 24:36**

Can you believe it? I mean, they had heard the reports and they were trying to believe it. But honestly, it was still a little hard to believe. Luke tells us, **“They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, ‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.” Luke 24:37-43**

Can you believe it? It’s Jesus alright. From sheer amazement and joy they are a little shaken, but it’s him. When he ate the fish, they knew it was him. He is risen, but unlike the other resurrections like the little girl or Lazarus. Something different, all together new, a new order. He appeared and disappeared before the disciples, he seemed to pass through locked doors, but he wasn’t a ghost or an apparition. It’s like the gospel writers were trying to explain something for which there was no explanation, no precedent. There still isn’t, but we know it’s true. We know it’s real. **“He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the**

third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” Luke 24:44-47

Can you believe it? The agony of Friday and the Silence of Saturday gives way to the glory of Easter Sunday. Jesus is risen. What does it mean? It means everything he said is true. It means the kingdom of God has come. It means the dawning of a new age. It means a new birth is possible for us. It means what Jesus said about repentance and forgiveness, that’s the truth! Can you believe it? All of your cruel, foolish, sinful, horrible, stupid mistakes and sins can be forgiven now because Jesus is who he says he is, the Savior of the world, the one who can save and pardon and forgive your sins! The resurrection proves it. He is Savior and He is Lord of all! He shows us a new way to live, forgiving others, a way of love and reconciliation and healing and hope and we can believe it because Jesus is risen from the dead!

His resurrection means everything he said is true, everything he has promised is certain. Those who mourn will be comforted, the meek really will inherit the earth, those hungry for righteousness will be filled. The merciful will be shown mercy, the pure in heart will see God, the persecuted will inherit the kingdom of heaven. You can believe it all because the resurrection settles it! He is who he says he is and that means you are who he says you are. You are the righteousness of God in Christ, you are a brand new creation in Him. You don’t have to live in condemnation and fear because Jesus, the risen, living Lord of life has saved you and delivered you and now you can walk with him, in Him, by his Holy Spirit.

Can you believe it? There is life after death and there is a place that Jesus himself is preparing for you and he is going to call you home someday. I believe it because Jesus rose from the dead and lives forevermore. He conquered death and promised me eternal life. But it isn’t just about life after death, it isn’t just about the promise of heaven when I die, it’s about the promise of life and freedom and his abiding presence here and now!

Can you believe it? More importantly, will you believe it? Everything I’ve said this morning is true. It’s the gospel. It’s true and its good news. Repentance and forgiveness is available to you. If you repent of your sins and believe in your heart you can receive his forgiveness and receive that new life. The bible says, **“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it is with your mouth that**

you confess and are saved...for ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” Romans 10:9-12

Can you believe it? Will you believe it and receive it? Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” John 20:29. If you believe, you can have life in his name (John 20:31). Christ is risen. Believe and receive!

I want us to pray. The choice you make today is the most important you’ll ever make. Will you believe Jesus died on the cross for you, as the substitute that took your place and bore the penalty for your sins, then proving that God accepted the sacrifice, Jesus was raised from the dead and is alive at the right hand of God the father. He is offering forgiveness and new life to you today. Will you believe and receive it by faith?

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!