

Factoring the Unthinkable

A sermon on Luke 24:1-12 & Romans 6:3-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 March 2013

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Message

The life-changing implications of the resurrection can be just as bewildering and impossible to get our heads around as the resurrection itself.

Acknowledgement

This sermon is heavily indebted to Tom Wright's treatment of these passages in his [*New Testament for Everyone*](#) commentaries.

Sermon

Christ is risen! and no one saw it coming. Christ is risen! and it has caught everyone off guard. Christ is risen! but even those who had been closest to the experience of his life could not believe that his extraordinary aliveness could break free once he had succumbed to the all-conquering power of death. You often hear it said that the only things certain in life are death and taxes, and sure enough everybody has an unshakable faith in the power of death. When Jesus was laid lifeless in the tomb, even his closest friends had far more faith in the power of death than they did in God's ability to fulfil what Jesus had said about rising to life on the third day. Our faith in death is absolute. Our faith in life and our faith in God are far more fragile.

This group of women who came out to the tomb on the Sunday morning, planning to complete the embalming process that had been cut short by the hasty burial and the Sabbath rest, had, as the angelic messengers reminded them on arrival, been among those who had heard Jesus say several times that "the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." And yet they weren't heading out to the tomb saying "Hopefully he's not there anymore because he'll be risen like he said, but we'll take the embalming spices just in case." No, their faith in death was absolute. And when they reported back to the rest of the disciples that his body was gone and they'd been told he had risen, none of the other disciples believed them either. Arrogant males that they were, they dismissed the report as mere hysteria from women driven mad by grief. Their faith in the power of death was absolute too.

Why did they not believe what Jesus had said? Why were they not expecting something like this? Well actually, we do this kind of thing all the time. We hear something, but it kind of slides through our consciousness without making any impact on our thinking because there is simply nothing in our existing frameworks or ways of thinking for it to latch onto and take root. So we hear it, but we don't really hear it at all. If we register it at all, we register it only as something we don't really understand and which we might come back to later when we get some more information to help us sort out what it means and what to do with it. Jesus' words about the resurrection were like that. It wasn't that nobody believed in the resurrection. Jewish faith of that day did include belief in a resurrection, but it was the final resurrection of all the dead at once that would mark the end of time as we know it. The resurrection of one person while the rest of the world went on with its business seemingly unchanged simply did not compute. It could not be anticipated in terms of the existing belief in resurrection, and it had no other precedent or reference point to enable them to grasp it. It was simply unimaginable, unthinkable, impossible. And if you try to line up the various accounts of the resurrection and make some sort of coherent narrative out of them, you will see that they

were clearly written by people whose heads were blown apart by the whole experience because they are all over the place and don't seem to make much sense at all. That is usually the case when you get multiple first hand accounts of an event that all the witnesses found bewildering and incomprehensible.

Our inability to compute what is going on is perhaps even more profound when it comes to the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for the living of our own lives. This is what the Apostle Paul is grappling with in the passage we heard from his letter to the Romans. He is trying to break through our incomprehension. "Do you not know?" "Do you not get this?" he is asking. Do you not comprehend that in baptism you were buried with the Messiah into his death, and so too now you are united with him in his resurrection life? Do you not get this? Well actually, no. For the most part we don't get it. We don't dismiss it as the hysteria of grief stricken women, but it mostly seems to us like the abstract ponderings of crusty old theologians. Not something we can latch on to and get excited about and find our lives radically changed by. But Paul is desperately trying to break through and enable us to encounter it as something more than that, as something every bit as shocking and bewildering as the resurrection itself.

And here tonight, in a few minutes, we are all going to be renewing our baptismal vows, and three people are going to be asking us to accept them into the membership of this congregation on the basis of their confirmation of their baptismal vows, and so I want to join with the Apostle here in trying to break this concept free from the tomb incomprehensible theology so that we might begin to be as startled and excited and transformed by it as those who first encountered the risen Christ were.

The crunch issue that Paul is trying to get through to us is how the resurrection changes our relationship to sin, to our patterns of participation in the ways of rivalry and jealousy and selfishness and hostility and divisiveness and destruction. And in summing up, he says, "So then, you must reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." The word he uses there that is translated as "reckon" is actually a word that comes from accountancy. It might also be translated as "calculate" or "tally up". His point is that we often continue to live as though sin had some authority over us because we haven't yet calculated the implications of what has happened to us in our immersion with Christ into his death and resurrection. It is like a shop keeper adding up the takings at the end of the day. The adding up doesn't make any change to the takings. They are what they are, counted or uncounted. But the reckoning does change what the shopkeeper can now do. He now knows what he can afford to do next. So too, our reckoning of the consequences of our solidarity with Christ in his resurrection will enable us to realise the startling truth of what is now possible as people over whom the forces of death and sin no longer have any ultimate authority.

Try thinking of it this way. Some of you have known people who have spent time in jail. Many of those who are jailed for some years find themselves so institutionalised by the experience that after their release, the only way they can cope is to continue to live as though they were still inside. Take that a step further and imagine that you are a prisoner, and for years a particularly nasty and vindictive prison guard bullies you and victimises you. Because his authority inside is absolute, there is nothing you can do but submit to it and endure it as best you can. For years you live in constant fear of this brutal tyrant and you resentfully obey every petty order he gives in order to minimise the abuse. But then one day you are released and you are free. Finally the abuse is at an end and you return home, much relieved, and

begin a new life. But then one day, there is a knock at the door, and when you open it, your old tormentor, the prison guard, barges into your house and begins pushing you around again. Paul is warning us that most of us are facing exactly that situation, and from fear and habit and inability to imagine an alternative, we have capitulated again and reverted to the old habits of allowing him to push us around, even though we are now in a place where he has no real authority, only what he can dupe us into giving him. “Reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus,” says the Apostle. Stand up to this bully because he has no further authority over you. Calculate the implications of the new situation. In this new place, the tyrant can only get away with terrorising you if you let him. You have been set free. You are alive in Christ, sharing in the resurrection life over which sin and death have no authority at all. Throw this bully out, and live the life of freedom.

Yes, that idea is as radical and incomprehensible as the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In fact the whole gospel of Jesus is virtually incomprehensible to the world we live in. We have been so institutionalised to a world where the systems grind on relentlessly, dividing us into categories of good and bad, clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable, and nothing good ever comes to anyone without being earned and qualified for, and once gained everything must be fiercely guarded because there is never enough to go around and someone else will surely try to take it off us. The gospel of God’s extravagant and inexhaustible love and grace, freely poured out for everyone with no distinctions of gender or race or religion or sexuality or even deservedness and past behaviour has trouble finding any precedent or reference point for it to latch on to and take root in our minds. We can easily hear it without hearing it, and remain completely uncomprehending of the exhilarating implications of freedom and new life. But we are here tonight because Christ is risen and we have been raised with him. And here tonight, we are hungry to taste the almost unimaginable implications of that, to reckon the meaning, and to rise to the fullness of the life that Christ has won for us. So come, let us keep the feast!