

### **Luke 24:1-12 “Jesus is on the Loose!”**

There was no doubt. Jesus was dead. He had been handed over to the Jewish council where he had been mocked, beaten, and accused of blasphemy. He was passed off to Pilate who passed him off to Herod whose men had beaten him and put a robe on him, mocking his royalty. Herod passed him back to Pilate who tried to release Jesus but, the crowd was too strong and Pilate was too weak. A criminal was released and Jesus, the innocent one, was sentenced to death. The mocking had continued as Jesus was led to a place called The Skull where nails were driven into his hands and feet and there, he was lifted up on a Roman cross, an instrument that was designed for a slow, humiliating, and very painful death. As the people stood watching and as soldiers continued to mock him, Jesus delivered his spirit into God's hands and breathed his final breath.

Luke records how the women saw this take place, standing at a distance. And they followed the body of Jesus until they saw with their own eyes where he had been laid. His lifeless body was wrapped in linen by a man named Joseph and he was placed in a tomb. The women wanted to anoint the body but the Sabbath was beginning, so they went home on Friday night where they would rest until they could do it on Sunday morning.

There were no doubts, though they didn't want to believe it. Though their hearts were breaking. Though their hopes for a Messiah were shattered. It was undeniable. His body was cold. He was not breathing. He was not moving. He was not healing or preaching. There was no celebration that Sabbath day for the disciples. Instead, there was only mourning and grief, sadness, and shame.

Never has the power of human sin been so evident than in the death of Jesus. For the very one who came to bring us life had been killed by our own human hands. The ultimate sign of our brokenness. Hope was lost. It seemed that evil and death had won the battle.

His disciples were defeated and afraid....and Jesus was alone...in a dark tomb...*he was dead.*

Read Luke 24:1-12

But early on the first day of the week...They found the stone but they DID NOT find the body. The lights were on but no one was home. They had come expecting to find death but instead they found signs of life. And in their confusion and wonder, the message of the angels comes to them: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen!” I love the way Eugene Peterson translates this sentence: “Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery?”

One writer speaks about how he receives a phone call from an old friend of his every year on Easter Sunday. The phone rings and he picks up and says, “Hello” and his friend says with excitement in his voice, one simple little Easter greeting: “Jesus is on the loose” and then he hangs up.

Are you familiar with this phrase? “On the loose?” It's often used to describe what happens when someone breaks out of prison. He's on the loose...he's gotten through the defenses. He has broken his way out. The authorities have lost control of him and there's no telling where he'll go.

Or it's used when you're walking your dog on a leash and all of a sudden, the leash breaks and the dog takes off...he is "on the loose." That dog can go anywhere and there's no stopping him. All you can do is try to catch up.

**The empty tomb says: Jesus is on the loose.**

Religion can't control him.  
Fear and doubt can't keep him away.  
Earthly powers can't prevent him.  
Sin can't stop his love.  
Hell can't hold him back.  
And the grave can't contain him.

He has defeated evil. He has made a way for the world to be reconciled. He has revealed the love of the Father. And he has conquered the greatest enemy, even death itself. **Nothing** can hold him back. He has forever changed the world. Easter begins a new day. The darkness of night has given way to light. God's new week has begun. New creation has been set in motion! And there is hope for resurrection...for us as individuals but also for the renewal of God's whole world. This is more than just hope for heaven when we die. As the angels reminded the women, this has been God's plan all along to redeem and renew his creation and he has carried it out through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thanks be to God. Christ is risen...He is risen indeed! **Jesus is on the loose and there is no stopping him.**

And if that is true, if that tomb was empty, then what does that mean for us? What does it mean for you and for me? Resurrection gives us hope that God's healing work has already begun in Jesus. And we are invited to become witnesses of that new reality. We are called to leave our own tombs behind and be raised new life.

But it begs the question...can we declare resurrection in a world that is surrounded by signs of death?

The best way to illustrate this is by taking a look around us...nature itself. We know from our calendars that Spring has already begun and yet today, it's quite cold...and the trees in the forest are still brown. But if you look closely, you can see evidence that something has changed. Buds are beginning to come out. Flowers are beginning to bloom. Winter is trying to hold on but it cannot stop the life-giving power of the Spring. And those first witnesses to the Lord's resurrection became people who proclaimed that the winter is over. They proclaimed even in the face of death, that new life had already begun in Jesus.

Now we don't deny the pain. We don't deny the struggle. We don't deny the temporary grip that evil seems to have on our world. But we do announce that the victory has already been won and it's only a matter of time until Spring fully arrives. We announce just as the early Christians did, that Christ is victorious and the resurrection gives us hope for today and for tomorrow.

Some of you may have heard the story that came out of Haiti. Over 200,000 people presumed dead from this disaster. The Nazarene college campus in Haiti became a shelter for people displaced by the quake. At that time,

over 400 people were living on the campus hungry and homeless, many of them grieving from the loss of loved ones. One night, in the open air, just two weeks after the earthquake, the students led a prayer service on the campus. In the darkness of the night with death surrounding them, the whole crowd gathered and began to sing this song.

**Cue music – “Because He Lives” live recording from Haiti**

“because he lives, I can face tomorrow. Because he lives, all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future. And life is worth the living, just because he lives.”

And one of the participants that was there said, “I don't speak Creole,” but I understood their hearts perfectly and wept openly as I heard them singing the message of hope in Jesus.”

That first Easter morning, the disciples didn't have a big celebration prepared. They weren't waiting with a surprise party for Jesus. If anything, they were living in defeat...trying to go on with their lives as though Jesus was gone for good. I think it's fair to say, the disciples didn't expect to ever see Jesus again.

I think it's significant that Jesus doesn't appear first to Herod or Pilate or Caesar. If I were Jesus, I would be standing in the middle of Jerusalem right outside Pilate's bedroom, saying, “I told you so!” But Jesus doesn't do that.

Instead, the message of resurrection comes to this group of grieving women whose testimony would have been doubted in that culture because they were women. He

comes to a gathering of skeptical apostles who have locked themselves in a room because they are afraid. When the women finally came to them with news of resurrection, the apostles called it “idle talk.” The word found here is the same word used for people who are experiencing hysteria. This was the first church board and they didn't even believe in the resurrection! Later that day, he appears to two sad disciples on the road to Emmaus who think that God has abandoned them and that Jesus has failed in his mission. And resurrection comes to a curious leader like Peter who is filled with guilt because he has denied the Lord. Not the kind of picture we expect to see...

**I think the miracle of Easter is not that we're strong enough or good enough or that we can find enough faith and look hard enough until we find the living Jesus. The miracle of Easter is that the risen Jesus comes and he finds us.**

In the midst of our grief, in the midst of our pain, in our confusion and fear, even in our skepticism, sin, and doubts, the risen Jesus comes to us. He comes and speaks the words that he did to his first disciples, “Peace be with you.”

And that encounter with Jesus is what turned grieving women into messengers. It turned skeptical apostles into joyful worshipers. It turned a struggling, defeated group of disciples into a powerful community that changed the world. Many of the disciples didn't give their lives for an idea but for an encounter with the living, breathing Christ. And if we allow him, it is that same risen Lord who will transform us.

As we gather in his name today, he is present. As we hear from the word of God, we find that it's not just a story about the past but that God is speaking in the present. As we break the bread of communion and drink the cup, it is not a mournful remembrance of someone who is dead and gone. Instead, our eyes are opened and the living Jesus becomes our host. And the meal becomes a celebration of all that God has and is accomplishing in Jesus. Jesus said that where two or three of us are gathered in his name, daring to talk about him, he is there, talking to us. And *his* presence changes everything!

Perhaps the biggest temptation for us today is to decorate our homes and our churches, have a big celebration, and talk about resurrection but fail to be transformed again by the surprising presence of the living God in our midst. We could talk all day about the historical proofs for or against resurrection and we could tell the story that happened long ago in Jerusalem...But ultimately, Easter is about an Encounter with the Risen Jesus here and now. As Mary Jane Cornell writes, "The hope of the resurrection is that this world is not just where Jesus died-this world is where Jesus lives!" And just as Jesus was set loose from the grave...he wants raise up his church and set it loose on the world...to be living witnesses of this incredible news. Because the greatest evidence to the world of a resurrected Christ is a resurrected Church.

So let us not leave here today simply believing that Jesus has died and risen just so we can go to heaven when we die. It's absolutely true that we have hope for eternity. But Easter doesn't end there. Easter invites us to be swept up into the story - to discover the empty tomb for ourselves and be changed by an encounter with the living Christ so he

can send us out in the power of his Spirit to announce good news in THIS WORLD.

So the question remains for all of us today...Why are we looking for the living among the dead? What is keeping us from believing? What is keeping us in our tombs? What is keeping us from encountering the risen Christ? He is not in the grave...he has risen! And he is on the loose! Are you ready to meet him?

**Amen...**