

“Really Big Words”

Luke 24:1-12

Sermon notes for the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

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An Easter Prayer

Disturb us, O Lord
when we are too well-pleased with ourselves
when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, O Lord
when with the abundance of things we possess,
we have lost our thirst for the water of life
when, having fallen in love with time,
we have ceased to dream of eternity
and in our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of Heaven to grow dim.

Stir us, O Lord
to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas
where storms show Thy mastery,
where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
In the name of Him who pushed back the horizons of our hopes
and invited the brave to follow—Jesus, Jesus, Jesus

—Adapt., attributed to Archbishop Emeritus **Desmond Tutu**,
adapt. from an original attrib. to Sir Francis Drake.

Luke 24:1-12 ¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

The LORD is risen!
The LORD is risen, indeed!

Three brief stories:

(1.) When Tiger Woods sunk his final putt on the 18th hole winning last week’s Masters’ Golf Tournament, CBS announcer Jim Nance called it, in his silky voice, “the return to glory.”

(2.) A Washington Post columnist said of the University of Virginia big win in the NCAA National Men's Basketball Championship, "The way they redeemed themselves was something out of a Disney movie..."¹

(3.) A friend of mine told me over tea this week that when he was a young man he got lots of pleasure taking the El for 50-cents across Chicago to Wrigley Field and buying bleacher seats for two dollars. Hotdogs cost thirty-five cents. Beer cost fifty. "It was heaven," he said, smiling. "It was *heaven*."

The use of those three words to describe sporting events and hotdogs seems appropriate, *in one way*. Woods' 'glorious' putting and the UVA 'redemptive' turn-around were thrilling. They pulled off great victories after consistent, long tournament play. Good for them. Their performances were electrifying. And sitting in the sunny seats of Wrigley with a Chicago dog can be 'heaven,' I suppose. (*Though some would argue a St. Louis Cardinals games is heaven, and a Cubs game is not.*)

But in another way, the use of the word "glory" to talk about anybody's golf game, and "redeemed" to talk about a basketball team, and "heaven" to talk about an afternoon at the ballpark leaves me feeling perplexed.

"Glory" is a word used 13 times in Luke and it usually has something to do with Jesus' or God's splendor, majesty, perfection, excellency, exaltation.

And the word "redemption" (used 115 times in scripture) usually has to do with God delivering people, liberating them, particularly from their sin.²

And heaven is the dwelling place for stars—and for the Most High God.

We often use the words "glory," "redemption," and "heaven" when we talk about Jesus' resurrection—another word that perplexes us.³ *Resurrection*.

To use these words one Sunday to describe a golfer, and the next Sunday to define the resurrected Jesus suggests to me that we may not know what we are talking about. These words are freighted with common meaning, on the one hand, and, also, on the other, they speak of other-worldly, ethereal things that are practically unspeakable. This conundrum of language reminds me how inadequate words often are.

How do we talk about the resurrection? What sense do we make of it?

When we speak about God, we, naturally, reach for big words, really big words like "glory," "redemption," and "heaven." But more often than not, we stammer and are left speechless—and that's okay. We are in good company.

The women came to the tomb to prepare Jesus' (dead) body for final burial. But the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, and instead of Jesus, the women found two heavenly beings in shining clothing. The women are terrified. They bow their heads. And they do not say a word. (Like us,) they are speechless.

When the women run to tell the other disciples what the angels said—that Jesus had risen from the dead, that we should not seek the living among the dead, and Jesus already told about this dying and rising

¹ (Gene Lyons, *The News-Gazette*, Champaign, Monday April 15, 2019)

² See scripture such as Exodus 6:6 "I will **redeem** you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment." Job 19:25 For I know that my **Redeemer** lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;

³ Athletes "resurrect" their careers after injuries. Teams "resurrect" their season when their play turns around and the losses turn into wins.

but we never really listened, and now we find that it is true—when the women run to the men and tell them what they saw and heard, the men do not believe their words.

But Peter, thank God, runs to the tomb to see for himself. There are some things that words cannot convey, where only seeing is believing.

We read in the next verses of Luke that Jesus had gone ahead of them. He appears with them again, walks with them, eats with them, teaches them, blesses them, and then, in verse fifty, ascends to heaven.

That's the end of Luke's gospel, but the Bible-tellers follow the story beyond verse fifty. Peter, the women, and the other disciples begin sharing this story about their friend, Jesus, who rose from the dead. And they, along with the other writers of the New Testament grapple with big words to talk about it: Glory. Redemption. Justification. Salvation. Heaven. Holiness. Grace.

One of our Holy Week hymns, also, struggles to find words:

*What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend,
For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine forever, and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to Thee.⁴*

And that may be the *best word of all*: LOVE.

God loved us so much, he sent Jesus not only to tell us about that love, but to show us. And the best word to describe this love is not “glory,” or “redemption,” or “heaven,” or, even, “resurrection.”

The best word to describe this love is *Jesus. Jesus. Jesus.*

The best word to describe God's love is: *Jesus.*

The LORD is risen!

The LORD is risen, indeed!

⁴ “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” *Glory to God Hymnal*, Passion Chorale, Latin, 12th or 13th century, music Hans Leo Hassler, 1601; harmony Johann Sebastian Bach, 1729.