



The Trinity Pulpit



Certainty in Uncertain Times

John 20: 1-20

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Helmut Thielicke once wrote in an Easter sermon “The accounts of the resurrection are a moment of the indirect and discreet way in which the Bible indicates an event that it really cannot describe in words. For obviously one cannot speak of resurrection as one would describe a business set back or an ordinary historical event. What takes place around this tomb is all bathed in an indirect and puzzling light.” The resurrection stories we find in the gospels are filled with mystery that is “bathed in indirect and puzzling light.” They are stories that are filled with as many questions as there are answers. They are stories of an event so marvelous and spectacular that its description is different in all four gospels. What we can know for sure is what happened previous to the moment of resurrection and what happened afterward. The moment of resurrection transforms the lives of those involved and it forever transforms the world in which we live.

The more I read the stories of Jesus resurrection in the gospels that more I am struck by the fact that there is more uncertainty in the stories than there is certainty. In fact, the one thing we can say for certain is Jesus is alive when once he was dead and beyond that the others involved are filled with uncertainty.

If we look at John’s account we find several statements of uncertainty. Mary sees the empty tomb and her first thought is not resurrection but grave robbing. She runs to Simon Peter and John to tell them that “they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” They, whoever they are, the Roman Guards or the Jewish religious leaders, someone has moved the body according to Mary. Her mind is filled with the uncertainty of that which should have been certain. What she knew for certain that day was that Jesus was dead and that Jesus’ body had been laid in that particular tomb for she had followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb to see where he had been placed. Now the body was gone and there was uncertainty.

Peter and John run to the tomb to see and discover the body is gone as well. Although John claims to have believed once he saw the empty tomb, we are not sure what the term means. Some suggest it means he believed in the resurrection and others say it means he believed Mary. The next comment may give us a sense of the previous verse because John writes an aside that “they did not yet understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.” Mary is looking for a body and the disciples do not understand... uncertainty.

Later in John’s account we have the story of Thomas who misses the first encounter with Jesus and the disciples and his refusal to believe until he sees it for himself. Again there is the sense of uncertainty on Thomas’ part even when he has heard the story of the others. The other gospels also have this theme. In Luke we are told the Peter leaves the empty tomb wondering what has occurred. The women throughout the stories, whether it is hearing Jesus’ words or angel’s words, are afraid more than any other emotion.

These are the emotions which emerge from the resurrection stories. There is fear, uncertainty, anxiety, despair, and bewilderment. Are these not the same emotions that fill our lives in times of uncertainty? We live in uncertain times whether it is economically, politically, personally, culturally or even sometimes spiritually. Sometimes it feels as the world is spinning too fast and God is too slow and our faith is antiquated and unable to grasp the mystery of living in this moment and time. What we long for is something certain. We desire something or someone that we can count on and will be our very rock and foundation for our future.

It is interesting that the disciples and the women in the resurrection stories were uncertain about the very things that cause us such angst. They were uncertain about their past. This might sound odd because if you pass through an event

surely you knew what happened. Yet, that is not always true. There are many moments that we pass through and experience that leaves us wondering what happened. What was that moment in life about? Does this experience have more meaning for me than just another daily event? Our past can leave us with as many questions as our future and sometimes more.

The disciples and the women had to be uncertain about what had happened. They had followed Jesus these several years, seen him work his miracles, heard him teach and preach about the Kingdom and God and now it was over. It was over in what must have seemed like a whirlwind week. How could everything go so wrong in such a short time? Those kinds of moments can leave you with in fear, despair and bewilderment. These are the exact emotions which are expressed here in John 20.

Our past can surely leave us with uncertainty. Although we have experienced the events we are still left with questions. What does it mean that I lost my job? What does it mean that my loved one passed away? What does it mean that this relationship has been strained? What does it mean that I have passed through a time of illness? What does it mean that God seems to be silent in my life right now? Can I say anything is certain?

Those moments of our past can leave us fearful for the future. Those kinds of moments can leave us living with regret and shame in the present. Dr. Cleo McClure of Princeton University once said in a lecture “We all live in haunted houses. There are some skeletons in everyone’s closet rattling around.”

It is true we have all live in haunted houses. We all are haunted by our past in one form or another and whether it is the uncertainty of what it means or the uncertainty of one day having our past come to light our past fills our hearts with uncertainty.

John Maxwell suggests in his book *Today Matters* that our past can cause us to exaggerate our accomplishments, live only in the dreams of our future, or dwell bound by our failures. If we choose to live today and tomorrow filled with only the mystery of the past we will never really live. Our past is filled with uncertainty and if we remain lost in this uncertainty we will remain afraid, bewildered and anxious.

Those at the resurrection were also uncertain about the present. Mary’s response is “we don’t know where they have put him.” The cross still does not make sense and now another event that causes questions. John and Peter we are told did not understand that according to the scripture Jesus must rise from the dead. They must have been asking the questions of what now? We all have

those days that seem to go from bad to worse. Just when we are up to our eyeballs in the demands of work there is a call from a family member with an urgent request. Just when we think we can do no more, more is demanded of us. Just when we think this is all I can take the world laughs at us and hands us another obstacle.

I can remember when our children were little and we took Tyler and Jordan to Disney World. We always thought Tyler was bigger than he really was and I was determined to make him ride Space Mountain. He was tall enough. As got into our seats he sat down in front of me with his grandfather and me and my brother in law climbed into the seat behind them. Tyler was getting more and more nervous as was I. Tyler did not want to show his fear to his Dad but as we started off on the roller coaster into the dark I just heard him yell to me “I don’t like this!”

That is how we feel some days. Get us off this thing! Someone call a penalty for life piling on. Those moments can fill us with an anxious uncertainty of what now! So it was for the disciples and the women that day at the empty tomb.

Of course they were uncertain about the future. Their future had been certain only a few days before. Many of them had left certain futures as fishermen, businessmen, disciples of John, wives and sisters in villages where there was security to follow Jesus. Yet, Jesus seemed to offer them more certainty that those situations. Yet, now that was all gone or at least it seemed that way on Sunday morning. The plans they had made. The way they had dreamed things would be when the Kingdom came. All of their jockeying for position in the Jesus’ pecking order seemed silly now. Their future was so uncertain that the disciples, except for John, had run away into the night and were hiding in that upper room.

Let’s admit it that our future is if anything uncertain. We can make our plans, we can have our dreams, we can do everything we know to do to make our future certain but the one thing we learn as we age is that life always has some surprises that causes us to realize that in the future there is uncertainty.

We discover our lives this Easter morning is not much different than the lives of those who were present that first Eater morning. They are filled with uncertainty about the past, present and future. Yet, there is an event that occurs which transcends their uncertainty. There is a certainty that comes to their lives that makes the uncertainty pale in comparison. Is it the empty tomb? Not really. They all see the empty tomb and still are asking questions and wondering. Is it seeing the grave clothes? Not really. They see the grave clothes and still are

afraid? What is it that changes everything? It is an encounter with the living Jesus. You see it is not the facts but it is the Truth that changes their lives.

In his book, *A Hunger for Meaning*, Calvin Miller describes the difference between facts and truth. He writes "Two plus two equals fact, but truth is too grand a word to use when we speak of common addition. Truth is elusive; fact is blatant. Truth is amorphous; fact is defined. Truth is prone to be quiet and reflective while fact is often loud. Truth is the fear of the astronaut; fact is the escape mechanism." The facts on Easter were an empty tomb, a missing body, folded grave clothes and an echo of a promise from Jesus. The truth was a living Christ. It was their encounter with the Truth that gave certainty to all of their uncertainty.

It was the moment Jesus said "Mary" that Mary experienced the resurrection. It was Jesus coming through their closed door of fear and bewilderment and being in their midst and speaking peace that became the transforming moment for the disciples. It was Jesus saying to Thomas to effect touch my hands and my side...go ahead touch them so that you might believe. It was the personal encounter with the living Jesus that brought them peace to their anxiety, hope to their despair, meaning to their questions and confidence to their fear.

Here is what I find the most interesting about the story. There was still a lot of uncertainty remaining even after the encounter with Jesus. To be sure there is a change but not everything had changed. Jesus is alive but there is still uncertainty. Although Jesus was alive this was not a back to the future moment. The certainty of the future and present was not found in a return to the way things used to be. Sometimes we think that the only way to control the future is to stay living in the past where we are comfortable. Jesus is back but things have changed. He is going to the Father and he is not staying around. There are still the questions of what they are to do now and what the future will be like. What I want us to understand is that the resurrection did not erase all of the uncertainty it just gave us the certainty of a living Jesus with which to face uncertainty.

A living personal relationship with Jesus is the only way to give us certainty in the midst of uncertain times. With the certainty of a living Jesus then we look at our past and all of sudden meaning and purpose become evident where once there was nothing but lack of understanding. With the certainty of a relationship with the living Jesus the present which would send us into a spin become moments where we have a peace and joy in our hearts even as we pass through troubled times.

With the certainty of a relationship with the living Jesus we do not fear the future. We can fact tomorrow with confidence for as Paul would write I know whom I have believed in and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day.

Max Lucado asks the question of why John stuck around till Sunday. Others had deserted Jesus. There was no real reason to stay through till Sunday. He had seen the events of the death. He alone of the 12 had witnessed the crucifixion. Maybe he stayed to care for Jesus' Mother Mary as he had been instructed. Maybe he stayed because it was the Sabbath and he would not travel on the Sabbath. Yet, Lucado suggested that he stayed for the very reason the woman stayed and prepared to anoint the body. They all stayed around between the crucifixion and that Sunday morning because they were in a relationship with Jesus. This was not just another prophet, healer and teacher it was their friend. They had shared life with Jesus and so out of love and because of relationship they stayed. Lucado comments on this thought by suggesting the John had the habit of staying close to Jesus whether it was in Gethsemane or at the cross. He was also quick to go to the tomb. Did he understand it all when he went to the tomb? No, but he went anyway. He stayed near Jesus long enough to see God work. Then Lucado writes:

*When it's Saturday in your life, how do you react?
When you are somewhere between yesterday's tragedy
And tomorrow's triumph, what would you do?
Do you leave God- or do you linger near him?
John chose to linger. And because he did on Saturday
He was around on Sunday to see the miracle.*

A young man asked his pastor "I want to know what really matters! Don't give me the flowery words of religion. Tell me from all of the pages of the Bible what really matters. The pastor thought to himself for a few moments and then said here it is from Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:

I delivered to you that of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance to scriptures. That he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance to scriptures and that he appeared to Peter and the twelve.

That's it! That is the heart of the gospel. That is the certainty we need for certain times. Jesus died for you and I and God raised him from the dead. No matter how our yesterday haunts us, no matter the trials of today or the fears of tomorrow Jesus is alive and of that we can be certain.

Helmut Thielicke “The Silence of God” (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1962) p.80.

Cleo McClure, As heard in Preaching Lectures at Campbell University, March 2010.

John C. Maxwell “Today Matters” (New York: Warner Books, 2004) p.10-11.

Calvin Miller “A Hunger for Meaning” (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984) p.66.

Max Lucado “He Chose the Nails” (Nashville, Tn: Word Publishing, 2000) p.122.



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