

*The Wonder Of It All*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Psalm 16:5-11, Acts 13:27-33, Luke 24:1-12*

This week's final Scripture reading is from Luke 24:1-12. Listen now to God's Word. "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with 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; 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."

How do you deal with the unexpected things in life? Most of the time, we dislike the unexpected – we like the familiar because it's safe. As many of you knew, I was quite happy that I was able to get back in time for church last week after having a blowout on the way back from Ohio on Saturday. I wasn't so happy when I found out the cost of replacing my tires on Tuesday morning! We often face the unexpected with a sense of dread, knowing that whatever it is, it's going to hurt.

But the unexpected isn't always like that. Sometimes, the unexpected is nothing short of wonderful. In 1879, Louis Pasteur was doing experiments with chickens and cholera when one of his assistants used an old bacteria sample by accident. The result? Pasteur discovered the concept of vaccination. Wilhelm Roentgen received the Nobel Prize in 1901 for discovering X-rays...by accident. In 1928, Alexander Fleming saw a culture of bacteria he'd been studying that had been invaded by a mold by accident...and he discovered penicillin. Some would say that these were coincidences; others would see them as God's blessings. But these unexpected discoveries have changed the modern world.

The reason we celebrate today, the reason that churches all over the world are ringing their bells and spreading the good news, is because of the wonder of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Was it unexpected? Jesus had told His disciples exactly what was going to happen to Him numerous times...that He was going to die and then be resurrected on the third day. But in their confusion and dismay, they didn't understand. They didn't expect it.

Now the women headed to the tomb the moment the Sabbath is over...the moment the first light appears, they are on the way to anoint Jesus. His body had sat in the tomb without attention for over a day, and in that climate, they had to hurry. This was a man that they loved, that they themselves had sacrificed for, and while they didn't understand everything that had happened, the last way they could show their love for Him was to anoint him for burial.

But when they arrive, there's a shock...the stone in front of the tomb is gone, and so is Jesus' body! They had followed Joseph of Arimathea and watched him lay Jesus in the tomb, so they know where He was supposed to be. It's only when these two men, later identified as angels, tell them that they understand. But once they do, they rejoice.

And that leads us to our first lesson from this passage today: *don't be afraid to follow where Jesus leads, even if the way is unexpected.* The women who went to the tombs that morning weren't expecting Jesus to be alive, but it took a lot of faith for them to go in the first place. The stone in front of the tomb had been sealed and a guard posted because the Pharisees, Jesus' enemies of all people, *did* understand Jesus' claims of rising on the third day. The gospel of Mark records the women as they debated how they were going to be able to get in. Yet they went. They took a step of faith, the only one they could. They were loyal to Jesus despite the death of their dream that He would lead Israel to greatness. They never expected Him to die a horrific death on a cross, but somehow, they kept following.

That is the call of Easter...follow where Jesus leads. Sometimes we'll be mistaken or confused about what He says or what He does or why He does it. But keep following. And unlike the women on that Sunday morning, we know that Jesus is alive and well! Easter is a celebration of the impossible becoming possible, the proof that God does indeed love us and desires to be in fellowship with us and became flesh and dwelt among us. And when we follow Jesus, we will never be led astray. That kind of following is the way of faith. As Hebrews 11:1 defines it, "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Faith is confidence that *God* knows what He's doing, even when *we* don't.

So what *is* God doing? God is making Himself known in our world. He made Himself known to Adam and Eve, to the people of Israel and their forefathers, to the surrounding nations. And through Jesus Christ, His Son, He has made Himself known to the farthest points on the globe. He has made it known that He loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. But our sin, our disobedience, our desire to go our own way and to declare ourselves our own gods rather than to love the One who made us, has separated us from Him. The path we all choose is one of suffering and loss, of death and eternal judgment. God gave the Israelites the Law so they could stay close to Him, but they constantly rebelled against Him. In the Old Testament, there's little talk of an afterlife because, as Psalm 143 says, "No one living is righteous before you."

But God was not satisfied with being apart from the people He loved and created. God promised to send a savior, one who would rescue us from our sins. In Jesus Christ, He made that promise a reality. In living a perfect life, Jesus not only experienced our pains and sufferings, He also became the only One who could wash away our sins and take judgment on Himself in our place. In that perfection, though, death could not defeat Him, and He rose from the grave, not just to die again but to live eternally, as a promise to us that we, though we die, will live again. Through faith and trust in Him lived out through obedience, we can know Him as our Savior. That's what God is doing! Unexpected? Absolutely. Does following Him mean we die to our sinful selves? Yes! But don't be afraid, for following leads to eternal life.

When we talk about trusting in God like this, sometimes it feels like we're stepping out blindly, but that's not what God expects. In fact, the second lesson from today's passage is this: *don't be afraid to investigate God into the unexpected places*. When Peter gets the news that Jesus is resurrected, he doesn't argue...he just runs to the tomb. He goes in and bends over and checks out the linen strips for Himself. The text says that Peter left in wonderment – marveling and amazed. He doesn't have all the answers, but he knows that God is at work.

I am always amazed at how few people really want to examine the Christian faith. Perhaps we fear that God will fail us! But God has given us the intelligence to search out the mysteries He has created. The Bible says in Psalm 34:8, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." In 2 Peter 1:16, we are told, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." God wants us to believe with integrity, and we can. Whether it's the nearly 25,000 copies of the Greek New Testament we have dating back to the first and second century, the reliability of the manuscripts, or the archeology that continues to show the truth of the Bible, we can be confident we have an accurate witness to Jesus Christ. The apologetic proofs for Jesus being the promised messiah are first-rate. At some point, we must move from skeptic to believer, from proofs to faith. But God is not dismayed by the person who seeks Him with integrity.

We live in a day when atheism is fashionable, when you can find a book from somebody attacking religion on the best-seller charts each week. There's an idea that you can't be an intelligent, rational person who's also a believer. But God doesn't ask us not to think. The book of Acts tells us that Paul and the other disciples *reasoned* with the people from the Scriptures, showing that Jesus was the Christ. Reasoning was their common practice! Integrity of thought and heart and mind are important to God, and we must ask ourselves...are those who are trying to convince the world that there is no god working with the same integrity?

Some of us grew up being taught that the pastor or the priest or the church had all the answers, that we were not to question, only to obey. But God never expected this. He expects us to be like Peter. Examine the tomb, come to grips with the risen Savior, and then determine to follow Him. Will you ever find enough answers to eliminate doubt? If so, let me know, because I don't have them all! But what I do know is this: God wants for you to know Him, and He has given us the evidence we need for our minds to be satisfied. He wants you to move in faith, into those unexpected places where He will travel, but God wants your faith to be based in your confidence that He is the real and living God.

This moves us into the final lesson of this passage...*don't be afraid of rejection when you follow God into unexpected places*. The women ran back from the tomb with fantastic news. But the disciples rejected it. In fact, the Greek word translated "nonsense" is the root of our word "delirium." The disciples thought that the women were crazy! But there's far more to the story than that. The fact that the good news of Jesus' resurrection came first to the women is testimony to the veracity of the gospel. In Jesus' era, women were not trusted as reliable witnesses – if the story of Jesus' resurrection was made up, why would anybody have had the good news proclaimed to women first? The disciples' own reaction was proof of this problem! The only reason anyone would claim that women were privy to the resurrection first was because it was true. The rejection they faced has shown later generations the truthfulness of the gospel.

It seems hard to follow God when rejection is on the line. None of us wants to lose friends or lose face for the sake of Christ. But Jesus Himself was rejected. As the angels said, He was “handed over to sinners” who crucified Him. He was killed by the very same people He came to save. But their rejection could not stop the love of God the Father, who raised the Son as a sign to the world that His salvation is stronger than death. And through His rejection, Jesus proved His love for us and for His Father.

In 2 Timothy 3, Paul says this: “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” At the same time, he remembers his own sufferings and says, “Out of them all the Lord rescued me!” These statements hold true for us. Standing up for Christ will hurt sometimes. And yet the fact is, when we hold fast to Jesus in the midst of trials, God builds our character and maturity, and we become even greater witnesses for Him. Our perseverance through persecution builds the Kingdom of God.

Take as an example the story of Evelyn “Granny” Brand. She was a rich heiress who left her wealth and family behind to marry her husband Jesse, and they ministered in south India in an area called Kolli Malai, the “Mountains of Death.” They had a dream of bringing the gospel to five mountain ranges in the area. In their first year of ministry, they had a single dying man believe...then nothing. The Hindu priests in the area opposed their teaching, despite the fact that Jesse was able to heal many of the sick and helped them in countless ways. After seven years of rejection, a Hindu priest got extremely sick. No one would carry for him save for Evelyn and Jesse. As he died, the Hindu priest gave his children to the Brands to raise, saying that Jesus must be the true God because the Brands alone came to help him.

Despite the villagers’ amazement, the gospel was still rejected by most. Then came Jesse’s death of malaria when she was 50. Though their dream hadn’t come true, Evelyn worked on for many years. At one point, she faced rejection from her own mission board who thought it was crazy to send a 68-year-old woman back onto the field. They sent her back for one year, and at age 70 she officially retired from her mission agency...but she never left. She immediately started an independent work on her own to reach the other four mountain ranges. By her death at age 95 in 1974, all five mountain ranges had been reached with the gospel, a mission work was planted on each, and she was working on two more. Too frail to travel on donkeys and her crutches as she had for years, those who became believers through her work carried her on a stretcher so she could reach still more for the gospel. The rejection she faced for over 30 years emboldened her, and the good news of Jesus Christ still lives on in the “Mountains of Death.”

As we look back at what we’ve learned this morning, it might seem strange that each of our points this morning starts with, “don’t be afraid.” But when we come in contact with the living God, when we realize that we are truly in the presence of the One far greater than ourselves, fear is our natural reaction. But time and again, God tells His people, “Do not be afraid.” He said it to Abraham and to the Israelites, to Mary and Joseph, to the shepherds who attended Jesus’ birth. Jesus said it Himself to the women when He later appeared to them after His resurrection. God wants us to live triumphantly in Him. When we live with God as the center of who we are, there is nothing to fear. Hebrews 13 says, “God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?””

Some of you might have hoped for an Easter sermon this morning that would be nice and sweet and maybe a little dull...on the other hand, you might have had a little fear that God really might get a hold of you and change your life. Truth is, every person here today, from the newcomer to the long-time Christian, has that same fear...the fear that we might find out that God wants something from us we can't give, that He wants us to follow rules we've already broken, that we will only discover God's anger at us. But God desires to show us mercy. God desires to bring us into relationship with Himself. God desires us to know Him for all eternity. If you've come this morning and you don't have that relationship and want it, if you want to know what it means to investigate the life of Christ and follow Him, talk to me after the service, and you can know what it means to find joy and peace and forgiveness in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate God's reality working in our world in unexpected ways. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the foolishness of God is shown to be greater than the wisdom of man. Give yourself over to the One who died to save you from sin and suffering and eternal death. Trust in Him...follow Him into His foolishness, trust Him despite the shame, know Him with your heart *and* your mind...and you will find eternal joy in the God who loves you. You will know face to face the wonder of it all...the wonder of the risen LORD.