In Good Company
Luke 24.1-12

A sermon preached in Duke Gardens on March 31, 2013 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

On Friday, Good Friday, the God-man Jesus died. Saturday, Holy Saturday, God rested, just as God had rested when the world was made. The first time God rested, God had affirmed the goodness of the creation God had finished speaking into existence on the first Friday. Very Good Friday. Then came the first Holy Saturday. “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it” (Genesis 2:2-3a). But this time when God rested it was different. As the world waited on Holy Saturday, Jesus went to the place of the dead.

So came the first day of the week. We are told a group of women eagerly awaited returning to the burial work they had begun late on the sixth day. Unlike God’s work in creation, their work was not yet done. They observed the Sabbath, Holy Saturday, but everything was not good. It was the dawn of a new day, Sunday, and they hurried to the tomb. Unlike the gospel of John, Luke does not tell us about a garden—that place that might remind us of the first day after God rested on the first Holy Saturday. Instead of a garden of paradise, Luke tells us this posse of women travelled to the place of stone and hewn rock, the place of the dead, the place where life loses, where death triumphs, where the Word God spoke to and for humanity is muted by a stone too massive to move.

The women found the stone rolled away. But they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. It couldn’t be. No sealed tomb. No dead body. Confused, bewildered, and perplexed, what could the women do? Earlier in Luke’s gospel some men of faith busted through a roof to find Jesus for the sake of their friend. Maybe if these women of faith would dig in the right place, they could uncover Jesus too? In their bewilderment and confusion, the women look up to see two men in dazzling garments, that is to say, two angels.

The angels declare that the living one is not to be found among the dead because he has risen just as he said he would. The angels proclaim that Jesus now stands again. Jesus stands again like he stood in the temple at the beginning of his ministry to proclaim release, recovery, good news, and freedom. Jesus stands again like the man whose friends lowered him through the roof on a mat stood again. Jesus stands again like the prodigal son who returned from death to new life in his family stood again. Jesus stands again like the man with a skin disease stood again in praise of God after Jesus had healed him. Like each of these before him, Jesus stands again. Yet, Jesus’ resurrected life is unlike these because his resurrection is the one in which these risings finds their ultimate end and meaning. In Jesus’ resurrection, in this standing again, God overcomes the places where life loses and death triumphs, and, precisely there, the Word of life is spoken and speaks again forevermore.

The angels declare to the women that the death Jesus died and his resurrection on the first Easter morning were consistent with his life and teachings. The angels say, “Remember and understand what Jesus said and did! Don’t look for the living one here! He is risen!” On Holy Saturday, the women anxiously awaited the first day as they rested. Dawn broke, and they returned to the place of the dead where Jesus was buried. Yet, through the silence of Holy Saturday and in the break of dawn on Easter Sunday, God triumphed over death in raising Jesus from the dead. Jesus is alive, and now he lives forever. “Don’t look for the living one here,” the angel-men proclaim. He is risen! Alleluia!

This joyful proclamation of the resurrection elicits a response. To remain neutral to this declaration is not to have heard it. Once the resurrection story ruptures the silence of death and captivity and bondage and hell, the sound waves of resurrection life vibrate down to the depths of one’s being. There will be a response, but what response this resurrection declaration draws out depends on the hearer. Luke offers three possible responses. Let’s begin with the apostles—those who closely followed Jesus during his ministry. They heard all the things the angels proclaimed at the tomb. They are reminded what Jesus said about his death and resurrection, and that these things had been fulfilled.
After hearing this, the apostles responded with cynicism and disbelief. They thought the story of the stone rolled away and the body gone and the reminders of Jesus’ teaching were an idle tale, nonsense, unbelievable.

I wonder if you identify with the apostles in your response to the proclamation of Easter. Maybe you’re skeptical or cynical or doubtful about all this resurrection talk. Maybe it’s a cognitive thing, something you can’t empirically prove or philosophically comprehend, and you can’t get beyond it. Maybe you’re saying, “So what if people give witness to Jesus being raised? It sounds like nonsense, like a desperate attempt to cover-up the suffering and death that has taken another would-be redeemer.” Maybe your Easter response is not “Alleluia!” but “I don’t think so.” You’re in good company; that was the apostles’ response.

Luke illustrates another response, Peter’s. Peter heard the story. He listened to what the angels sang. He remembered what Jesus said about how he would be killed on account of sinful humanity and would rise again. Peter heard this and sprang to action. Peter—the one who let Jesus down, who fell asleep instead of praying, who denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed—this Peter stood again. He rose from the death of denial to see for himself what he had been told. And upon arriving at the tomb, he looked into the depths of death, and saw the burial cloths but no body. This tomb had not held the Messiah. Peter departed from the tomb in amazement and wonder. Unlike the first group, Peter moved beyond doubt to see for himself, but his seeing didn’t immediately result in belief. Instead, Peter marveled, his curiosity peeked in wonder, but he had not yet found faith.

I wonder if you identify with Peter in your response to the proclamation of Easter. Maybe you’ve walked with Jesus in the good times but have been a denier or deserter when the road got tough or when the cross was looming. Maybe death and fear and sacrifice have been too much for you to bear, so you turned away. And now this Easter proclamation has given you a chance to rise again from the broken places you’ve inhabited in your guilt and shame. Maybe you’ve gone to see for yourself about the empty tomb, to see if life can be made new in places of death. Maybe you’ve witnessed some of this and been amazed at what you saw. You’ve marveled and wondered at the possibilities, but you’re not quite sure if your curiosity is ready to become commitment. Maybe your Easter response is not “Alleluia!” but “Let me see! This is interesting!” You’re in good company; that was Peter’s response.

Luke portrays a final response, that of Mary of Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women. Perplexed by the moving of an immovable stone, these women were terrified at the sight of the angel-men in their dazzling duds. But their terror turned to testifying as they remembered what Jesus told them regarding his death and resurrection. With new insight and understanding of their memories of Jesus’ words, the women believed that Jesus stands again in resurrection glory, and they left the tomb to tell the others. Those ready to tend to the dead body of their beloved have become the witnesses of the empty tomb—the empty tomb, that glorious sign of the time of the Lord’s favor, of release for the captives, of recovery of sight for the blind, of freeing the oppressed, and of bringing good news to the poor. The women become like the angels in declaring the risen Lord.

I wonder if you identify with the women in your response to the proclamation of Easter. Maybe you’ve encountered someone or something holy at a point of confusion and bewilderment that opened your eyes anew to the hope of God. Or maybe you’ve been frozen in fear because of a loss or uncertainty about the future, and you’ve found yourself too terrified to trust in anything beyond what you can see. Then, at just the right time, you were reminded of the promises of God’s future for you. And maybe, with your new insights and deeper understanding of the extent to which God goes to be with you, you’ve gone away to tell others, to testify to the victory of life over death, of love over hate, of Christ’s kingdom over hell. Maybe your Easter response is, “Alleluia! I’ve got to tell everyone!” You’re in good company; that was the women’s response.

Whether your response is like the faithful women, or Peter, or the other apostles, there is good news this Easter Sunday. Jesus’ resurrection has changed all time and all eternity. Easter is now the time on which all other times and seasons are founded. And so, Easter is not a solitary day on which you get one chance to respond. Like Peter and the other apostles who were confronted again and again with the
Easter proclamation through Jesus’ presence, Jesus will keep coming to you because even death and hell could not keep him from being with those he loves. Jesus will keep showing up, and he’ll keep making himself known in the breaking of bread to you and to me and to the whole world. And for this, we can rise on the first day of the week, at early dawn, and together proclaim, “Alleluia!”