

## **DEATH DEFEATED**

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

1 Corinthians 15:1-10a  
Luke 24:1-12

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As a minister, I regularly find myself at cemeteries. Most often, it's because I am officiating at a committal service, so I don't have a chance to walk around. However, there have been other occasions when I have had opportunities to walk around cemeteries. At those times, I often get very caught up looking at grave stones, reading the dates, names and verses, and trying to imagine something about those buried beneath the markers. I've walked through cemeteries in Williamsburg, Gettysburg, Plymouth and Boston. I've been to Arlington National Cemetery several times. I've been in Cathedrals within our country, like the National Cathedral, and discovered there are tombs of past church leaders and benefactors located within its building. And I discovered on my Reformation trip about 18 months ago that the placement of tombs within Europe's old Cathedrals and Basilica's was also common.

Obviously, I am not the only person who finds burial sites interesting. Some of the most visited tourist sites in the world are tombs. There are the pyramids of Egypt, the burial sites for some of the great pharaohs of the ancient world. There's the tomb of George Washington, our first president, located on the grounds of his beloved home, Mount Vernon, and the tomb of Abraham Lincoln located in Springfield, Illinois. There are the graves of John D. Rockefeller and James A. Garfield located in Cleveland's Lake View Cemetery. There are also famous tombs that contain the unidentified remains of soldiers like our national one at Arlington Cemetery or the one I saw in Paris located beneath the "Arc de Triomphe." Throughout the world the tombs of history's Kings and Queens and Presidents and Emperors and Popes and Saints of the church make for interesting tourist stops.

Some of these tombs are ornate and flashy, and others are quite simple and almost easy to overlook. Some tombs are visited often, others only occasionally, and some perhaps rarely. But the one thing that all of these tombs have in common are bones. After all, death is death. Once in the grave, bones don't tend to move – not in ten years, a hundred years or even a thousand years.

But today, I direct your attention to something that is so extraordinary, something that is so contrary to our human experience that it's hard to imagine. I direct your attention to a tomb with no bones. When Mary Magdalene and several other women went to Jesus' tomb early on a Sunday morning following the day of Sabbath, they expected to find a body. After all, on Friday, they had watched Jesus suffer and die on a cross. After he was taken down from the cross, they saw Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body and place it in a new tomb. None of those women had any earthly reason to suspect that a corpse would not stay put. In fact, trained Roman guards had even been placed at the tomb to make sure that the body stayed put.

And yet, as the women approached the tomb very early on Sunday morning, they discovered the stone rolled away, the soldiers passed out, the tomb empty, and two presumed angels telling them that Jesus was not there because he had been raised from the dead. At the very center of our faith, stands this truly extraordinary and unnatural occurrence.

Of course, explanations for the body's disappearance were quickly formulated. There was the explanation that an unconscious Jesus revived once in the tomb, got up, moved a heavy stone and walked out on his own. But everyone knew the Romans were

experts at torture and death. That's why a spear was stuck in Jesus' side – it was their job to make sure Jesus was dead and not just passed out. The soldier's own lives were dependent on them not making any mistakes.

Another explanation was that Jesus' body was stolen. Some have said that it was his enemies who took the body so that his own followers couldn't take it. But why didn't they produce the body when claims of resurrection began to circulate? Jesus' enemies would have done everything possible to stop those rumors, so if they had Jesus' body they certainly would have produced it.

Still others have said that Jesus' own fearful disciples came out of hiding and they overpowered trained Roman guards and took the body themselves. But in order to believe this we must believe that the disciples were not as scared and hopeless as all the Gospels seem to indicate. We have to believe that common working class men overpowered or somehow drugged trained Roman soldiers who knew well what happened to soldiers who disobeyed orders, who fell asleep while on duty, who abandoned their posts. Such an explanation is highly improbable.

But what I find to be the most convincing argument of all to the truth of Jesus' resurrection is what happened to those first disciples. Many of those disciples were themselves crucified, thrown to wild animals, stoned or set on fire. It is inconceivable to me that they would endure such unspeakable torture and suffering for a lie – for if they had stolen Jesus' body, they would have known there was no resurrection. A lie would not have transformed those fearful disciples into strong and courageous ones, only the truth, the living presence of Christ could have done that.

Throughout the centuries, people have consistently discovered through the risen Christ the life that defeats death. The resurrection reveals a God who has both the power and the desire to take what is dead and bring it to life. Those of us who believe, who have placed our hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ know that illness and sin, suffering and death cannot, will not defeat us.

It is because of the resurrection that a mind destroyed by materialism or selfishness or vanity or resentment can come to life again. Trust and emotions destroyed by adultery or self-centeredness or rage or exploitation can come to life again. A life that seems ruined can be restored. In fact, countless lives have been turned around because of Jesus. Convicted criminals have become spokespersons for Jesus. Alcoholics, who couldn't get away from the bottle, have found the strength to live a dry life through Jesus. People who have experienced terrible tragedies and have known deep despair have found hope and renewed purpose for their lives because of Jesus. Gang members have found the courage to leave behind their gangs, gamblers have found a new thrill to live for, workaholics have found a more profound and meaningful purpose for their lives, and those content to do nothing with their lives have found a passion that ignites them. Unfortunately, there are countless people in the world – people in our own community and perhaps even our own homes who continue to be consumed by the ways of death. Sometimes we ourselves feel more dead than alive. Their hope, our hope is in the power of Jesus' resurrection – a power that defeats death so that life can then thrive.

A number of years ago, Lee Strobel, a journalist with the Chicago Tribune became a Christian. The 2017 movie, "A Case for Christ" is a recounting of how Lee, not simply a skeptic but a self-professed atheist initially set out to disprove the divinity of Jesus Christ. But what happened instead was the personal experiencing of the living and transforming power of Christ in his own life. The more he increased his journalistic efforts to disprove the life and resurrection of Jesus, the more he felt drawn to Jesus. Not long after he turned his life over to Christ, his then five year old daughter went up to

his wife and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy." Here was a girl who had only known a father who was profane, angry, verbally harsh, and all-too-often absent because of work. That little girl experienced up close and personal the influence that Jesus can have on a person's life.

What about you? Have you seen up close and experienced personally the death defying, death defeating presence of Christ? Because of Jesus, we know the power of new life breaking through from within us and all around us. So, whenever faith springs life into a person, where there was nothing but despair, we say, "Yes, death has been defeated." When family members who have not spoken to one another for years are able to reconcile and embrace one another, we declare, "The resurrected Lord is at work." When flames of hateful rhetoric and violent acts are replaced by words of grace and acts of kindness, we see death losing ground. When the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed, we witness the power of life triumphing over death. Whenever the fearful are comforted and the lonely befriended, we know the risen Christ is right there. The resurrection reveals to us the power God over those things that threaten to diminish, defeat and even crush us. Because of the risen Christ, we have experienced a quality and quantity of life that cannot be found anywhere else. It's a life that is stronger than sin and death; it is a hope that nothing can destroy.

There is a rather well known story of Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of England during WWII that many of you may have heard at some time. The story illustrates well our Christian understanding that through Christ death is defeated. Churchill planned his own funeral, and so after he died his state funeral was carried out according to his plans at St. Paul's Cathedral. Churchill wanted many of the great hymns of the church, as well as the Anglican liturgy to be used during his service, and it was. At his direction following the benediction, a bugler, positioned high in the dome of Saint Paul's Cathedral sounded "Taps," the universal signal that says the day is over. But then came the most dramatic turn: As Churchill instructed, as soon as "taps" was finished, another bugler, placed on the other side of the great dome, played the notes of "Reveille." As Christians, we believe that the last note will be "reveille" not "taps" for this is exactly what the resurrection proclaims loud and clear. Death is no longer the final outcome – the ways of death no longer have the power to hold us captive.

Those of us who believe this and whose lives reflect this know how the power of resurrected life makes all the difference in our lives. It is a power that supports us through failures, firings, divorces, illnesses, disappointments, and death. Easter shows us that life not death is the last word. So, let us not be defeated, discouraged, and deterred by anything that is of death, because Jesus has defeated death. Jesus is none other than the Lord of life, the King over death, the ruler of life after death. May your life and my life boldly bear witness to Easter's truth: Jesus is alive – death is defeated! Alleluia! Amen.