

*The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid.*

*Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments.*

*And on the Sabbath, they rested according to the commandment.*

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.*

*And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.*

*While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel.*

*And as they were frightened, and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them,*

*"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.*

*Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered*

*into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."*

*And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.*

*Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told all these things to the apostles, but their words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*

*But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen clothes by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.*

**Luke 23:55-24:12**

### **Winning the Hopeless Case**

One of the handicaps we modern people carry into the reading of gospel stories is the benefit of hindsight. We already know how the story ends. So none of us is shocked to find ourselves announcing on Easter Sunday: "He is risen; he is risen indeed!" And I consider this a handicap because it prevents us from taking to heart the roller coaster ride that the loved ones of Jesus took beginning on Thursday evening through the following Sunday morning when the woman headed out for the tomb in the morning twilight.

Think of Joseph of Arimathea, who only five days earlier had likely witnessed Jesus enter Jerusalem like a king on Palm Sunday. Joseph may have waved a palm, and thrown his fancy coat down in front of the royal donkey, and sung of Jesus as that "...Blessed...King who is come in the name of the Lord." Joseph likely hoped against hope that Jesus was the answer to all Israel's troubles, the King who would vanquish the Romans and set old Israel's leaders right, and usher in a season of justice and goodness for all. So there is no roller coaster with an angle deep enough to show how deeply and bitterly Joseph's hopes were dashed that week.

So what does he do when faced with the spectacle of his King, writhing in his death throes on a Roman cross, exposed for all to see as anything but a victorious king by any terms the human mind could understand. What does Joseph do? He gathers up his old friend, Nicodemus, and they stride into the throne room of the Roman governor and they convince Pilate to release Jesus' body for an honorable burial rather than being thrown into the landfill which is what the Romans would have done.

Actually, to call what Joseph did for Jesus an honorable burial is no small understatement. Jesus was buried like an old king of Israel in the hand-carved, ornate tomb the rich man Joseph had prepared for himself. We learn in John's gospel that Nicodemus had likely spent his life savings to secure seventy five pounds of priceless "*myrrh and aloe*" for the burial. So however horrible Jesus' death had been, the two men decided to bury him like the king he had been the Sunday before. It is an example of what Paul would write about Christians years later that, "*We walk by faith and not by sight.*" So before sundown that first Good Friday, Jesus was down off the cross and tightly wrapped in fine linen and carefully carried to the rich man's tomb.

And all this was carefully observed by the women who, Luke tells us, "*had come with Jesus from Galilee.*" There were some number of women committed to seeing Jesus properly buried, but Luke names three of them as leaders, "*Mary Magdalene,*" a woman Jesus had found a demoniac, but who was healed and saved and became Christ's disciple, "*Joanna,*" who had left Herod's palace to follow Jesus, and "*Mary, the mother of James,*" who almost certainly was also the mother of Jesus. It might have taken a dozen women to handle the sort of royal burial that Jesus' rich and powerful friends had prepared for him.

And after seeing him buried just before sundown on Friday, the women returned to the city and took an hour or so to organize the spices Nicodemus had bought, and then the sun went down and the Sabbath came in and all labor had to stop so that the disciples could somehow worship God, broken hearts and all. The women had to rest that Sabbath, knowing that Jesus' burial wasn't right, that what time had allowed didn't satisfy the strict standards Jewish women typically observed in the burial of their loved ones.

I think it says something about their faith that they kept the Sabbath as a day of worship, and weren't tempted out to that tomb to do what had to be in their hearts to do for Jesus. And it says something about their love for Christ that at the crack of dawn on Sunday morning they were on the road, out the city, to wash and preserve his body even if custom told them that what they were doing was too little, too late. They were there to do what they could, however inadequate it may have felt.

Which I think again is what Paul would teach years later when he wrote, "*We walk by faith and not by sight.*" True faith is not doing every thing perfectly. It is doing what we can, the best we can, as God allows, and trusting grace to make up for what we missed and what we couldn't reach. So the women were there at dawn only moments after the ground shook, and the guards fainted, and angels descended on the stone and into the tomb looking like lightening personified. So the tomb was wide open and empty at their arrival, leaving them somewhere between perplexed and distraught, and at that moment angels appeared to them.

"*Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.*" the angels thundered to the women cowering on the ground in front of them. More gently, I imagine, the angels went on to explain, "*Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.*" With that simple explanation, Luke tells us, the women "*remembered his words,*" and left the tomb to tell the eleven apostles about the wide open, empty grave and the angels who had told them that all these things were exactly as Jesus taught them.

Early in the morning, without the benefit of hindsight, the apostles heard this story as the wild tale it would have sounded like to you or me. You saw what? You heard what? Going on three days of grieving and the apostles were supposed to believe...what? Bold impetuous Peter launched himself from the upper room and "*ran to the tomb*" only to find the place open and deserted, and the linen that had wrapped Jesus' body strangely still lying there on the slab. And the big, bold fisherman wandered back to the city "*...marveling at what had happened.*" And Luke leaves his resurrection account there, strangely incomplete and open ended, full of questions that would wait to be answered that afternoon on the Emmaus Road, or that evening in the Upper Room.

And it struck me as I read Luke that the way he tells the story is often the way that faith unfolds for us. Two rich men deciding to bury the body of a battered Roman convict as if he were still the King he had claimed to be the Sunday before. To the human eye, Jesus had lost the battle he had come to Jerusalem to fight, but Joseph and Nicodemus decided to believe in him anyway, to act like he was a King even though he had seemed to lose. Sometimes the events of life require us to walk by faith and not by sight.

The women from Galilee, three of them named as having staked their all on Jesus winning the struggle he had come to the city to fight. But now they continued to love and to own and to want the best for him even in death. And they couldn't even give him that because the Sabbath came too fast. So at dawn on Sunday morning, they head for the tomb loaded down with Nicodemus' spices, ready to unwrap the linen, and wash his body, and pack him in the perfumes, too little, too late but it was the best they could do. That was the faith God rewarded with the good news that Jesus had won his battle after all.

Yet in the Upper Room, the men, the very apostles Jesus had taught and trained and cared for were slow to believe the women's story. Peter ran to the grave, saw the open tomb, the linen still wrapped with no body inside, only to leave the place as perplexed as the women had been before any angel spoke to them. He was a good man, trying to wrap his mind around what he saw, but not immediately able to make it all add up. Which is, I think, often the way faith unfolds for us. Not brilliant insights that come quick and easy, but a growing sense of hope and encouragement that God has to slowly nurture into real faith.

What I love about gospel stories is how real they are, no hint of easy, effortless, programmed confidence, but real people confronted with a Savior and a gospel from heaven. And like us they have to struggle through uncertainty and confusion, needing grace for what they cannot reach, needing forgiveness for the sins they commit trying to find what God wants them to do, who God wants them to be.

These stories, properly understood, ring true to real life, and that's why we should keep reading even when they don't immediately add up. Right now in his gospel, Luke leaves the resurrection only barely understood, but later, on the road to Emmaus, and then later still in the Upper Room, Jesus will make things clearer and clearer to the men and women who will hang in there and wait for it. That is the faith that ultimately brings hope and encouragement to the people who stake their lives on it.