

## Inevitable Easter Luke 24:1-12

I have read the Easter story so many, many times, just as you have. And of course, I have also preached from it a good many times. This is why I'm surprised that I have always missed one word in the story, and an exceedingly important word at that. Of course, it's a little word, a four-letter word, so I have some excuse. But even so I wonder how I've missed it.

But before I tell you the word, let me go through the background of the story with you. As our Lord entered the third year of his ministry, miracles seemed to increase — including even the raising from the dead of a man named Lazarus — while at the same time the enemies of Jesus became more anxious and better organized. At last this opposition decided that the only way to deal with Jesus was to get rid of him; specifically, to persuade the Roman government to crucify him.

Several times Jesus told his disciples what was going to happen. He said that he would be arrested and crucified, and that on the third day he would rise again. I repeat, Jesus gave this word to his disciples several times.

But no matter how plainly Jesus spoke, the disciples just didn't get it. Their problem was a common one. Like most of us, they tended to hear what they expected and wanted to hear rather than hearing what was actually being said.

That's how it is that even on the night of their last meal together, the disciples were still arguing about what positions they would have when Jesus established his kingdom.

No wonder, then, that they were caught by surprise when Jesus was arrested later that evening. And no wonder that they all fled in fear. They watched from a distance as Jesus was humiliated, beaten and crucified. That was on a Friday afternoon. We can easily imagine how they spent Saturday. It must have been the longest day of their lives. I wonder if, as good Jews, they went to the synagogue. Or were they afraid to be seen in public, lest they, too, be arrested and brought to trial? Did they perhaps simply hide away, like hunted animals in a hole, terrified by what the future might hold? If so, it's because they missed the word I'm talking about on this Easter Sunday.

Early on the third day — Sunday — several women went to the tomb. They were going as an act of love; they weren't expecting an empty tomb. But when they arrived, they found that the body of Jesus was gone. Mary Magdalene ran to tell two of the disciples, Simon Peter and the unnamed disciple (who was almost surely John, the beloved disciple) that the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb. The two men came running. We don't really know Simon Peter's reaction at this point, but the Bible tells us that the other disciple "saw and believed." Then the gospel adds this fascinating sentence: "For as yet they did not understand the scriptures, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead."

The little word

That's the little word I have previously missed: must. Jesus must rise from the dead. That is, Easter was inevitable. The Roman government could do what they would with Jesus' body. His enemies could place special guards at the tomb. The tomb could be made secure and the stone sealed. Every effort could be made to be sure an end had been made of Jesus. No matter! Jesus must rise from the dead.

What does the Bible mean by that statement? Before I go further I should tell you that I have looked at a variety of translations to see if this word "must" really is the way it should be said and I found that almost without exception, the various translations said either that he must rise from the dead, or that he had to rise from the dead.

So, what does this mean? Above all, it is telling us that God had a stake in the Easter story. The event had to end a certain way, because God was making a point. And the point was this, that the power of death had now been broken.

When I was captured by that little word, must, I remembered something a pastor colleague of mine said several years ago, after reading a book by Ronald Knox, the fine British Catholic scholar of the middle third of the 20th century. He spoke the words originally in a Catholic girls' school where he was the chaplain. Father Knox said that since it was Jesus, the Son of God, who was buried, you would expect that as soon as he died, he would come to life again. Then he spoke these fascinating words:

“Every second during which [Jesus] stayed dead, on Good Friday and Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday morning, was a kind of miracle; a much more remarkable miracle really than his Resurrection.”

Father Knox is telling us that life was so inherent in Jesus, so native to everything Jesus Christ is, that it's no miracle that he was raised on Easter; it was more of a miracle that he remained in the tomb for as long as he did, during the hours between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning. For Jesus to remain dead was out of character with who he is. Jesus Christ is the Lord of life; death has no dominion over him. He must rise from the dead. He stayed in the tomb long enough for it to be very clear that he was, indeed, dead; but staying there was out of order for this Lord of life.

The Bible says that the disciples didn't yet understand this; they didn't understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead. I suspect that we don't, either. Now let me say on this wonderful Easter day that we do a pretty good job of celebrating Easter in our church, as they do in most churches. It's a festival day, and I think all of us who lead congregations, whether in little churches or in cathedrals, Catholic and Protestant and Orthodox, anticipate this day. We bank our altars with flowers. Our choirs generally outdo themselves, and those of us who preach try earnestly to be at our best. And of course, many of us dress for the occasion; perhaps not as much as people used to, when they had fewer clothes in which to celebrate and when therefore they made more of an occasion when they could manage to do so. But still today most of us try to look our best on this day — and it's right that we do.

But try as we will, I don't think we really get it. We can't fully grasp the wonder of this day — that when they buried Jesus nearly 2,000 years ago, death had lost its grip. Jesus had to rise again. By his death at Calvary, Jesus had invaded the stronghold of hell and had broken its power, as expressed in death. As far as death was concerned, the ballgame was over. I don't think most of us really get that.

The apostle Paul got it. That's why when he was writing to the church at Philippi, he said that he was "hard pressed" in his feelings about life and death, because for him living was Christ and dying was gain. He wanted to live because the people in his churches throughout Asia Minor and Europe needed him, but he wanted to die because he wanted to be with Christ.

That is, Paul understood — not just intellectually, but in the very depth of his being — that Jesus Christ had to rise from the dead; and that because he did, the whole situation in our universe has changed. And Paul isn't the only one who got it. I think of Joseph Addison, the fine British poet and essayist.

He was only 47 when he died, so he might reasonably have fought off death. But his last words were, "See in what peace a Christian can die." And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spent the last months of his life in a Nazi prison camp: Knowing that death could come any day by execution, he wrote to a friend, "Death is the supreme festival on the road to freedom."

What I want to say, on this Easter Sunday, is this: When our Lord died and rose again, he set loose in our universe a whole new power. And if we accept Christ and his promise, we become partakers in that power. Something new and irrefutable enters into our genetic code — our eternal genetic code. It is life, a power of life that death cannot overcome.

So, it would be right enough for us to say at the graveside of any true believer, or while pausing before the person's casket in a funeral home, he — or she — must rise again. Since their spiritual genetic code now partakes of the quality of our Lord, death has no final dominion over them. We will have to wait longer than three days before we see the miracle, but the miracle is assured.

That little four-letter word says so: The scriptures said that Jesus must rise again. And because he lives, we shall live also.

So it is, that I wish you, a blessed, triumphant, inevitable Easter.

Take this story to heart! Read it again and again during this Easter week! Fall in love with this Savior who went to the cross for you and rose again that you may have life forever with him.

One more thing! Come back again next Sunday because this Easter story doesn't end here - There is more to be read and much more to say about this Jesus. Please come back!!!!

Amen.