

+ Luke 24:36-49 + The Risen Savior Responds to Tragedy + 3rd Sunday of Easter + 26 April 2009 +

What do you say when a tragedy occurs? Recently we've heard quite a bit about some very public tragedies. We heard about the shooting down in Binghamton. This past Monday you may have heard about the tenth anniversary of the massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO.

Sadly tragedy isn't something unfamiliar to us. It's not always so public. Usually it affects someone we know and love as opposed to a large group of people. Tragedy may have even affected you or your family personally. So how do you respond? What do you say when you flip on the news and you hear about another tragic event? What do you say when calamity strikes someone close to you? How do you respond when tragedy strikes you or your own family? Often we simply don't know what to say, but in our text this morning we see **THE RISEN SAVIOR RESPOND TO TRAGEDY**.

It was a roller coaster ride of a day. The day started with Jesus' followers mourning a tragedy. The day ended with joy. When the disciples awoke on Sunday morning, they were sure Jesus was dead. It didn't make any sense. Just a week before, the crowds had welcomed him into Jerusalem like a conquering king. They praised him as David's son come to save.

Crowds had flocked to him in the temple courts, but everything changed on Thursday night. After celebrating the Passover, the tragic story began. One of Jesus' own disciples betrayed him with a kiss to a mob brandishing torches and weapons led by the Jewish religious leaders. The disciples ran for their lives while Jesus was hauled away in chains. Peter tried to follow Jesus, but was soon running away himself after publicly denying Jesus.

The disciples hid in fear behind shuttered windows and locked doors as the tragedy unfolded. Abandoned by his followers, Jesus endured beatings, ridicule, flogging and injustice. Soon he was standing before the Roman governor, while the crowds cried out for his death, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" The disciples cowered in fear as their innocent Lord carried his cross up to the hill known as the Skull, where his hands and feet were literally nailed to a rough, wooden cross. For several hours, darkness blanketed the land in the middle of the afternoon and earthquakes announced the most tragic news of all—Jesus was dead. With nothing to lose two of his followers quickly took down his body and buried him in a borrowed tomb.

The tragedy of Jesus' death crushed his disciples. It dashed all their hopes and dreams. Some had hoped Jesus would deliver Israel from the oppression of the Romans, while others had put their trust in him as God's Messiah, God's Anointed One sent to save all people from their sins, but Jesus was dead. None of that mattered now—such a sad and tragic end.

At this point, a bitter mix of emotions fell over the disciples. Fear controlled them as they wondered how long before the mobs would come after them. Doubt filled their minds. They were without answers, without purpose, with nowhere to go. They felt hopeless. Despair crept into their minds as guilt gnawed at them. Every disciple had abandoned Jesus in his hour of need. Peter had publicly denied him. Except for John and a handful of women, none of the disciples had even bothered to go out to Calvary. Such a tragic end to their beloved Teacher left them devastated.

Then Sunday morning arrived. Early that morning some of the women went out to the tomb to finish Jesus' burial. The others hid behind shuttered windows and locked doors. Soon they heard banging on the doors. Out of breath, the women had run back from the tomb to report what they saw. **"Two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning"** had asked them, **"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen!"** The grieving disciples dismissed the news as nonsense.

Peter and John went out to the tomb to investigate, but found it empty with no answers. Meanwhile two disciples left for Emmaus, a day's journey from Jerusalem. With Jesus gone, they had to get on with their lives. On the way, though, a stranger joined them asking, **"What are you discussing together as you walk along?"** The two disciples were shocked that he was so ignorant of the public tragedy of Jesus' death, but he responded, **"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"** The stranger, then, proceeded to show how all of Scripture pointed to...himself. When the disciples finally recognized Jesus, he disappeared, so they hurried back to Jerusalem, but the disciples were still unable to see past the tragedy of Jesus' death.

For that reason, the risen Savior himself had to respond to the tragedy. **"While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'"** We shouldn't be surprised by the disciples' reaction when their once-dead friend appeared in their midst. **"They were startled and frightened thinking they saw a ghost."** Surely they were seeing things! No one comes back from the dead, especially one who died such an awful, tragic death, yet Jesus stood in their presence in the flesh alive. He said to them, **"Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch**

me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” The disciples hesitated as they slowly reached out their hands to touch him, to put their fingers in the nail marks on his hands and the spear wound in his side. They still had a hard time seeing past the tragedy. Moments before, they had been grieving, but now this! We’re told, **“...they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement...”** So Jesus gave more proof. He ate a piece of broiled fish in their presence.

He really was alive, but Jesus had an even greater response to the mix of grief and fear and joy they felt. Jesus reminded them of what he had told them before. **“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”** So quickly they had forgotten what Jesus had taught over the past three years. So quickly the dark pale of tragedy had covered their hearts and minds with grief and hopelessness and despair. Just as quickly, however, Jesus had responded to it all with the one message that breaks through all that darkness. **“He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’”** That simple, clear light of God’s Word shattered their darkness. Christ had died. Christ had risen. Christ brought forgiveness and comfort for their hurting, grieving souls.

Really that’s how Christ has always responded to tragedy ever since our first parents, Adam and Eve, committed the tragic act of disobeying our holy God. With that one act of disobedience they brought the tragedies of sin and death into our world and into our lives, tragedies which leave us without hope, without purpose, without true joy, without life, and only with grief and despair over the condemnation of hell we deserve for our own disobedience. By nature, we are where those disciples were on Easter Sunday morning, but as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **“Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”**

Christ responds to tragedy in our lives as he speaks to us through his Word. Read Luke 24 and Christ’s response to tragedy is quite clear. He didn’t respond with nice comments about the deceased or some shallow, wish-washy hope of a better place. He didn’t even send flowers. No, Jesus came back to life and removed everything tragic about his death. As we’ve sung this Easter season, Christ Jesus did lay in death’s strong bands for our offenses given. He did take on sin and guilt and fear and doubt, but he conquered them. He crushed Satan, and left Death empty and powerless.

Now, in his grace, Jesus shares that good news with us through his Word. In his grace, he connects us with his victory over all that causes tragedy through water and the Word. In his grace, he comes to us in his Supper to comfort us with his body and blood with bread and wine for our forgiveness.

Through that Good News of life and light and hope and forgiveness, Jesus responds to our tragedy. Through the Gospel, he comes to us with the only real source of comfort when life seems to be in a tailspin and we’re left with nothing to say. Through the Gospel, he comes to us with peace for our hearts when life doesn’t make sense. He wipes away our tears with the reality that he lives, and therefore we, too, shall live. His death seemed like a senseless tragedy—another unfortunate victim killed for no good reason, but his death and resurrection were the only way to bring peace to our troubled lives, comfort to our sorrowing souls, and life in the midst of death.

Now Christ sends us to respond to tragedy with the only message that matters. Jesus told his disciples, **“You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”** Fifty days later, Christ sent that power from on high. Remember Peter who fled in sorrow after publicly denying Jesus? Recall what he said when he was put on trial by Jesus’ enemies for healing a man, **“It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”** In the face of tragedy, the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to respond with the only message that mattered.

We, too, are empowered by the Holy Spirit through the Word. Now we share the only message that matters in the midst of tragedy—the Gospel of the Crucified and Risen Christ. When someone we know and love is faced with tragedy and we wonder what to say, as witnesses of what Christ has done, with God’s help, we share the comfort of Christ. When the Lord allows tragedy to come into our own lives, we cling to that saving message of Christ—the only answer that cuts through all the darkness. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ comes to wipe away our tears and to silence all our fears and Christ will come again! We are witnesses of this risen Savior! May he shine through you when the darkness of tragedy come into your life or into the lives of others! Thanks be to God! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.