

Shiloh United Methodist Church

John 11:17-27, Luke 24

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The God We Can Know: I Am Resurrection and the Life

(Present Video: <https://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/37397/the-easter-gift>)

We have been journeying with Jesus these past 8 weeks through statements of who Jesus and God are, each statement is found in the Gospel of John. These statements carry with them two words to begin the statement, "I Am." As if the early Christian writers wanted us to take notice, because this is the phrase God calls himself in the Moses story in Exodus. "I Am" followed by different statements has helped us understand the character of God. We have found our God can share satisfaction, guidance, care, power, direction and today possibilities. Today we are focusing on a statement where Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life."

One day a woman left a meeting and she describes here story this way,

I desperately gave myself a personal TSA pat-down.

I was looking for my keys. They were not in my pockets.

A quick search in the meeting room revealed nothing.

Suddenly I realized I must have left them in the car.

Frantically, I headed for the parking lot.

My husband has scolded me many times for leaving the keys in the ignition.

My theory is the ignition is the best place not to lose them.

His theory is that the car will be stolen.

As I burst through the door, I came to a terrifying conclusion.

His theory was right.

The parking lot was empty.

I immediately called the police. I gave them my location, confessed that I had left my keys in the car, and that it had been stolen.

Then I made the most difficult call of all, "*Honey*," I stammered; (I always call him "honey" in times like these.) "*I left my keys in the car and it's been stolen.*"

There was a period of silence. I thought the call had been dropped, but then I heard his voice.

"*Are you kidding' me,*" he barked, "***I dropped you off!!!***"

Now it was my time to be silent. Embarrassed, I said, "*Well, come and get me.*"

He retorted, "*I will, as soon as I convince this cop I didn't steal your car.*"¹

Our first scripture for today comes from the Easter story found in the Gospel of Luke 24:1-12.

Luke 24 Common English Bible (CEB)

24 Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ They didn't know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. ⁵ The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living

¹ <http://www.barbaramcvicker.com/2642/car-keys-funny-story/>

among the dead? ⁶ He isn't here, but has been raised. Remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Human One must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." ⁸ Then they remembered his words. ⁹ When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. ¹¹ Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn't believe the women. ¹² But Peter ran to the tomb. When he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home, wondering what had happened.

This passage has always bothered me, especially after being married for nearly 11 years. "Listen to the women!" is what I want to shout at Peter. He doesn't believe them. Trust me Peter they know what they are talking about. These ladies have seen Jesus to the cross and to the grave, they aren't running back to play an April fool's joke on you.

However, I found some peace as I re-read the scripture passage in preparation for today. You see the gospel writers learned something from Jesus, how to leave keys in the story for us to pick up later. If you read the last line, Peter comes back home. He could be bewildered, or confused, but instead the Greek word they use translates in English to wonder. While I fault Peter for needing to check the tomb, and not trusting these women, who I want to point out were up before the men, the women's message and his frantic journey to the tomb resulted in the birth of wonder in Peter's mind.

What might this resurrection mean?

At times in our history of practicing Christianity, we who seek this wonder in resurrection have lost sight of what it means to us.

(Picture #1 – Church of Holy Sepulcher)

This is a picture of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, arguable one of the most holy sites of the Christian tradition. The legend goes that this church is built upon the tomb of Jesus and the place where the cross was. and I say legend because there are traditional sites and verified historical sites, we can't be sure about the church. No matter what, the number of prayers and deep convictions that have gone into this amazing church make it a holy place.

Now the Christian groups that make up this church, groups representing Christians around the globe tend to get in fights. For an example, in 2002, a monk moved his chair from its agreed upon spot to the shade. Seen as a hostile move, eleven were hospitalized when the monks of the different groups began fighting.

A “1853 status quo” agreed upon by all the Christian groups in the church states the church common areas cannot be so much as cleaned without all groups agreeing. The ‘immovable ladder’ that you can see here:

(Picture #2 – Church with red square highlighting.)

This ladder setup in 1852, cannot be moved due the 1853 agreement. Setup when the person who was supposed to open the door, did not come one morning and monk got impatient and climbed in a window.

When visiting the Holy Land my amazingly lucky father in law happened to strike up a conversation with a man who turns out to be the one who currently opens the door to the church each

day. He happened to share his business card with my father in law who framed the card and gave it to me. Mr. Wajee Nuseibeh's family has been opening the door each day or nearly a millennium. This Muslim family finds incredible honor in being the people to open the doors to the church where the empty tomb lies, and where Christians go to worship each day.

I love this story and I keep that card on my shelf to remind me that sometimes it takes people outside our everyday walks of life to open doors to us, to remind us of God's possibilities. Like prisoners in a tomb trying to find a key, we think only certain people in here with us have the keys to open the door or that we need a quick fix to set us free. I wonder if this is why one of my favorite authors quotes hits home so much, "*We are the most in debt, obese, addicted, medicated adult cohort in history.*"

How many of us find ourselves locked in some of these tombs of our culture? How many of us think the next thing someone offers will be the key to get us out?

Yet, even the scriptures it is little keys being dropped that help us find our way out.

One the favorite poems in my family right now is by the Sufi Poet Hafiz.

The small man
Builds cages for everyone
He
Knows.
While the sage,
Who has to duck his head
When the moon is low,
Keeps dropping keys all night long

For the
Beautiful
Rowdy
Prisoners.

Resurrection, and the gospel stories are about Jesus and God drop keys for each of us about how we too might find new possibilities by following the life and ways of Jesus.

Our second scripture reading today comes from the book of John. It is the story of Lazarus, the friend of Jesus, and brother of Mary and Martha. Lazarus has taken ill and died while Jesus chose to continue his ministry. Many of his disciples have wondered why he didn't return more quickly, and why he doesn't return to heal his friend.

John 11:17-27 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁹ Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. ²² Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."

²³ Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. ²⁶ Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world."

Like Peter on Easter morning I am always caught off guard with wonder at Lazarus' story and the resurrection that happens soon after this verse. I always think to myself, "I will never see a resurrection."

There is a story my friend tells about Mawanda. He says, "Mawanda's eyes bore her weariness much less than her body." She kneels in prayer in the back of her church at 80 years old, and her eyes stare at the floor. For most of her life she has lived within the brutal dictatorship that held the poor hostage in Zimbabwe. She endured the awfulness without protest-parched farmlands, thugs stealing needed supplies and rumors of torture camps run by corrupt police. She survived this until her husband and sons were arrested in the middle of the night and riven away in hoods, and never seen again.

In response Mawanda organized a weekly vigil each Friday afternoon at the police station. Beatings, taunting, and public strip searches did not deter her. She gathered all she could if not to revolt then to at least witness and protest.

Mawanda along with twenty other women came to the church, on that Sunday morning straight from jail. They were arrested at the Friday vigil and kept until Sunday morning without food and released only after a pastor intervened, promising to ask the women to suspend the vigils.

Mawanda had earned her weariness – both body and soul had been battered through months of resistance. In that moment, even if she didn't have the strength to pray, she could, at least, kneel and rest. The sanctuary began to fill with Christian praise music and African civil rights anthems.

The congregation clapped and swayed like we Americans do in worship, but as the music continued the dancing began, the music surrounded everyone within reach and Zimbabwean worship ensued, filled with Spirit and alive with hope. Mawanda rose from her knees, the music like healing oil seeping into her aching joints. She made her way to the pulpit. Once there she sang and clapped until the music ran its course and then she spoke.

“When I was in jail, one of the militia- a boy, one from our own community-asked me. ‘Why do you keep this up? You are old, and you have no hope. We will beat you down until you cant get up, and the vigils will come to an end.’

“I’m telling you what I told him.” Mawanda preached on, “I do it because the power within me is stronger than the power of this world. The world’s power-all it knows is violence, fear and degradation. It’s only strength is its lies: you are nobody, you can do nothing, you’re just another body to be dumped on the heap of the forsaken and forgotten.

“But,” Mawanda deepened her soul sounding voice, “I’m telling you there is a power greater than the power of this world. It is the power of the One who sides with the victimized, the power of the One who says ‘I hear the cries of the oppressed, and I will raise the lowly. I will not let my children wail in pain alone.’

“We are not nobody; we are children of God. We are not powerless; we can stand up for dignity and justice. We are not just bodies to be beaten and silenced; we will rise up-out of the greave if necessary – to witness against tyranny. They

can kill our body, but they cannot kill our soul. They can beat our flesh, but they cannot defeat our spirit. They can harass us, berate us, intimidate us, but they cannot rob us of the truth. The power in us does not die. It is the power of life, it is the power of freedom, and it is the power of God. And nobody can take that power from us. Nobody.”

Two weeks later, after two more weeks of vigils, Mawanda disappeared from her home in the middle of the night. By noon the next day, the vigil at the police station exceeded the capacity to jail the protesters.

So the protest sang on.

It still sings today.²

Then Mawanda leaves me a key and reminds me to look deeper. In the passage of John, just after our part today, just before Jesus resurrects Lazarus. There is a single line, “Jesus weeps.”

He cries. Jesus faces the reality of death, the sense of loss we feel at death. He faces for a moment the tomb and realizes the hardness of human existence. We all face death in big or small forms in our daily lives, and in that moment Jesus drops a key and reminds us that in order for resurrection to happen. We have to let something die.

We have to let fear die, we have to let doubt die, we have to let the reality that we are less than enough for someone else die.

Jesus is dropping keys for us when he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He is saying, “I will remind even you that new life is possible.”

Even you.

² From *The way of Jesus: Compassion in Practice* By Frank Roger's Jr.

Does this just happen on Easter for us? If we practice the Christian path of community gathering and prayer, going to share compassion with others, and returning to share with others, then hope has a chance to be resurrected each day in us. We too can become the people who drop keys.

Living Easter year round, is about finding the keys God leaves us. Learning from them and then dropping keys for others to find them. So, today as you leave worship I invite you to take a key with you.

Maybe you need hope that something can change in your life.
Maybe you need peace in the chaos of your circumstance.
Maybe you need joy to combat deep sorrow, and not happy go lucky joy, but joy that wells in you.
Maybe you need love, to know you matter to someone and I can say you matter to us and to God.

Finally, I invite you to find some way to drop a key this year for someone. Join us in volunteering for the FreeStore or by making sandwiches with us for the homeless, join us for a small group to share your challenges and learn with others, or help us by growing a plot in our community garden, so we can share it with a local food bank.

It is Easter, and April fools friends. I dare say Jesus is leaving keys in the ignition, and in the tomb. So we can look outside ourselves and find new life.

Shalom be in your hearts as you leave, and may you always have Amen on your tongue.