

The Resurrection of Our Lord

KEEPING THE PROMISE

Luke 24:1-12

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By Steven E. Albertin

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8Then they remembered his words, 9and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11But these words seemed to them an i dle tale, and they did not believe them. 12But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Diagnosis: Keeping the Promise, Part 1

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *On the First Day of the Week*

The women had hoped that things would have been different. Jesus

had generated so many hopes and dreams in them. He had made promises to them about His coming Kingdom and about the new kind of life that would be possible with its arrival. But all of that came to a grinding halt with His death. The promise of a new kind of life and a new kind of world was now broken like all the other shattered promises that litter the human landscape.

So, it was back to business as usual. “On the first day of the week” they went back to a world that they had once hoped would be different but now sadly and obviously was not. It was another day and another week in a world where only the rich and powerful keep their promises, and all they promise is to impose their will on the rest of us. The women went to the tomb to complete the rituals of death and finish their grieving. Like all of us, they had resigned themselves to living in a world where promises are continually broken, where dreams are constantly disappointed, where hopes always seem to become illusions and where finally all you want to do is go off and cry. Perhaps they were even a little embarrassed and ashamed that they had been so naïve to believe that their world could be any different. Now it was back to survival and learning how to cope with a world where you can trust no promise because the only thing that’s guaranteed is death. (That’s why it should come as no surprise that the disciples later dismissed the women’s joyful good news of the resurrection as “an idle tale”; they too had resigned themselves to such realism.)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Perplexed about This*

When the women arrived at the tomb and did not find the body, it didn’t make sense. In a world of broken promises, where not even Jesus was able to keep his promises, and got himself killed, they never expected to find this. They expected that Jesus’ dead body would be further proof and confirmation of what happens to you when you are naïve enough to so recklessly trust God (and

give your life away in service of others). So they were “perplexed,” just like we are, when things don’t add up. What had happened to Jesus’ body? Had it been stolen? Dead bodies don’t just come back to life and walk away.

We may criticize and even ridicule the women for not being prepared for this (as the two men in dazzling clothes seemed to do when they somewhat incredulously and sarcastically ask, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”); but would we have responded any differently? I suspect not, for we too are jaded and cynical about a world where promises are made and broken at the drop of a hat. We have resigned ourselves to the inevitable and have given up on the promises of God because that seems to be the only way to survive and put off the inevitable onslaught of the grave.

Oh, it would have been wonderfully glorious if Jesus was right: if God really could be trusted, if sins could be forgiven, if cheeks could be turned, if enemies could be loved, if the lion could lie down with the lamb, if we could indeed “love one another as I [Jesus] have loved you.” But Jesus was dead. And with or without his body, all the promise He had offered the world was dead too. [And, the truth is, we are not willing or able to accept evidence to the contrary. We figure there must be some other rational explanation for this empty tomb, for people who still come to the font to be washed, or to the table to eat and drink, or to church to have their sins forgiven, or to the shelter to care for the homeless, or to work to actually do a good job. In a world of broken promises and perpetual disappointment, such behavior makes no sense. In the real world there must be some other explanation. Like the women at the tomb, we can no longer believe that it could be otherwise.]

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Terrified*

But the women were not only perplexed and confused; they

ultimately were terrified by the implications of an empty tomb and the presence of these two men in dazzling clothes. In language reminiscent of the Transfiguration, the women sensed that they were in the presence of God or at least God's heavenly messengers. And that was not good news.

Why? Because now the world with which they had made their peace was falling apart. They had resigned themselves to cope with a world of betrayed promises where all you can hope to do is cut your losses and "deal with it." But now God had intervened in that world, and all they could think was that somehow they had blown it. Whatever they had done would never measure up to God's expectations. They were judged, incriminated, caught, "busted." Were they wrong to have come to the tomb? Had they somehow let down their dead friend, and were now going to have to pay? All they could think of doing was bowing their faces to the ground with the desperate hope that they might be delivered from their desperate plight.

Finally, in a world of broken promises it seems that there is only one promise that we can count on: when God shows up, we are in trouble. Yes, God keeps His promise (Part 1, that is). And God was now keeping His promise to the women . . . as he does to us: death to sinners. Death and judgment are indeed the last words of the Creator of heaven and earth. God made good on that promise to Jesus who dared to be a friend of sinners in God's name. On the cross Jesus paid for that ultimate blasphemy. See! Jesus' critics were right! And when Jesus didn't come down from the cross, it only confirmed how right they were. And now his empty tomb only added further insult to injury. Through these two dazzling heavenly messengers, God was making good on his promise (Part 1) to all those who foolishly believe that things in this world could be different. Such news was meant to terrify the women (as it does us)!

Prognosis: Keeping the Promise, Part 2

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *He Told You So*

The women, and we, may indeed have every reason in the world to be terrified and fall with faces to the ground in the presence of the righteous God. But that is not the reason why these two men in dazzling clothes had come. They did not come to further crush the women by telling them, "Told you so." No. Quite to the contrary, they came to tell them, "See, Jesus told you so."

Yes, in a world of broken promises there is finally only One whom we can count on to keep His promises: God! But God's last word and promise is not judgment and death for sinners—but forgiveness and life in Christ! (Note Luke's continual connection between the forgiveness of sins with the good news of the Gospel throughout Luke-Acts!) Jesus' death on the cross was not God's rejection of one uppity sinner who dared to upstage God's judgment with mercy; it was exactly the opposite. It was God's great and grand gesture of mercy for sinners by submitting Himself, through His own Son, to His own judgment. Mercy trumps judgment. Judgment is ended. Despite evidence to the contrary, the cross was not the triumph of judgment, but the triumph of love. Everything that Jesus said and did in the name of His Father was indeed true. God is the friend of sinners. Mercy is God's last word. And the empty tomb, and the announcement that Jesus is alive, confirm the truth of it all.

So, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." This is what Jesus had promised all along. "Remember how he told you . . ." God does indeed keep His Promise (Part 2, that is): He promises to be "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Death does not have the last word. God's judgment has been silenced. Instead God's second promise trumps the first: the promise of mercy and life.

So, women at the tomb (and you twenty-first-century disciples) struggling to believe the good news of the Gospel, why are you perplexed? You should not be surprised that the tomb is empty and that Jesus is alive. Neither should you be surprised that the gracious ministry of the church persists in the face of an utterly ungracious world. The amazing good news of this day is that God keeps his Promise . . . just as He told you so. It has all happened, just as He said it would: "that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." God keeps His promise . . . Part 2!

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *They Remembered* Finally the women had no more reason to cower in terror, fearful that their distrust of God would be exposed. At one time they had been sure that the only promise God would keep was to reward the faithful and punish the wicked. (And the terrible truth was that they were among the "wicked" God promised to punish; but they could admit that now because they also knew that this first promise had been overcome by another.) The Promise, Part 1 (the Law), has been trumped by the Promise, Part 2 (the Gospel). Because Jesus has been raised, they could trust in the mercy of God and the forgiveness of sins. Their dreadful past would no longer be held against them.

They remembered that Jesus had promised that he "must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." But now they realized that this promise was more than just a prediction of his future fate; it was also a promise of what Jesus' fate meant for their lives and their future. Just as the stone was rolled away from the tomb—no longer silencing Jesus' promises and sealing Jesus' fate—so also the women now realized that Jesus' promises were true for them, and their future was open and unburdened by the guilt and shame of their past. Because Jesus is no longer among the dead but is living, everything He has said about God, and demonstrated about God's

kingdom in His life, is vindicated. The Kingdom of God truly is among us! In this Kingdom God is the friend of sinners.

Now it is clear that not even death itself can thwart the truth of that message and the validity of that promise. No longer perplexed or unsure of themselves, confident that God would keep his gracious promise for them just as He had done it for Jesus, nothing could hold the women back.

And what is true for those women is also true for us. We remember the promises God made to us in our Baptism and every other place along the way. Because Jesus is no longer among the dead but is living, God's good promises are true. And God is keeping them already. There is no longer any reason to be perplexed. We can count on Jesus' promises and the future they create. Nothing can hold us back.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *They Told All This*
So the women, and we, realize that this is more than just the first day of another week. Today is more than just a repeat of yesterday. This is the first day of a new era, of a new time, and of a new age. This is the dawning of the Kingdom of God in which everything is different. Because the Promise, Part 2, is no "idle tale," but the truth—because God does indeed keep His promises, and most of all the promise to forgive sinners—the possibilities for change are endless.

Life no longer needs to be an endless litany of broken promises and continual lies. We no longer need tolerate a world where the rich and powerful presume to hold the power of life and death. Survival is no longer all that matters. Resignation to the inevitable is no longer necessary. The making and keeping of promises is no longer an idealistic illusion or a cynical pretense. Instead, the new kind of life demonstrated in Jesus' life and teaching is not a heavy burden, nor a cumbersome duty,

but a promising possibility and a wonderful privilege. Not even death itself has the power to make us play it safe. We “get to” become promise makers and promise keepers just like Jesus.

That’s good news. And you don’t keep good news to yourself. So, like the women, who “told all this to the eleven and to all the rest,” we tell the world!

If that isn’t a vision for the church, I don’t know what is.