

AS HE SAID

CrossWords Series (Part 10)

Luke 24:1-8

Have any of *you* ever been deceived by someone or something in which you put your trust? A person swears his or her loyalty to you, and then betrays you. You make a contract, you work at your side of the bargain, but then the other person doesn't live up to theirs. You buy a product that doesn't perform anything like the advertisement said. You hear a leader make promises and then later find them to be false. You follow a business or spiritual or diet guru who seems to guarantee success, and then the program doesn't deliver. Ever experience anything like that?

None of us sets out in life intending to become a cynic. But, over time, we get a bit like the mom who ran into her child one day when he was supposed to be in school. *"It's not that I'm accusing you of telling a lie, Bobby,"* she said. *"It's just that I've never before heard of a school that gives time off for good behavior."* The reality is that sometimes people – even those close to us – do damage our trust with Total Untruths. We used to just call them lies.

Or, sometimes, our skepticism grows because people don't give us the whole truth. They just give us Half-Truths. I'm reminded of the letter once received by the Internal Revenue Service. *"Dear Sirs: I cannot sleep. Last year, when I filed my income tax return, I deliberately misrepresented my income. Now my conscience won't let me rest. Enclosed please find a check for \$150 in back taxes. P.S. If I still cannot sleep, I will send you the rest."*

Alongside of the outrageous untruths and the sneaky half-truths that make us a little skeptical are, of course, the Definitively Researched Truths. Almost every day we hear from "authorities" who claim our trust on the basis of these stats or that study. Is it just me, or do you sometimes question the credibility of people who claim that they are experts? I feel, sometimes, like the hiker who hired a guide to take his family into the back woods of Maine. After several days of wandering around, the family begins to seriously doubt the competence of their guide. *"You said you were the best guide in Maine."* *"I am,"* he said, *"but I think we're in Canada now."*

It's probably felt a little like this with the coronavirus for some of you. Early on it sounded like the authorities had this illness contained. Or we'd be safe if we didn't gather in groups of more than 250, and then 50, and then 10, and then just the people you're with right now, and probably for a lot longer than we knew. At first it seemed clear that you only got the virus by touching it, and then we learned that it can be in the air. You don't you need a mask; but now we think you do. We thought this was Maine, but it turns out we're in Canada.

Here's the crux of the problem: When you've been outright deceived, or heard the facts spun, or even misled innocently enough times... it is easy to start thinking that there is no truth, or that all truth is relative, or that we don't have enough truth to really risk ourselves on. We become hesitant to trust people. We become anxious, volatile, morally shifting people who feel that maybe, in the end, our whole world is unstable and there isn't any bedrock on which to stand.

The women who went to the tomb on Easter morning would understand that. They had been amongst the most ardent followers of Jesus. They, and many other regular people, thought they heard in Christ's words a ring of dependable truth they *hadn't* heard from the Pharisees or the other leading voices of their day. In fact, the Bible says that **The people were amazed at Jesus' teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not like the teachers of the law (Mark 1:22).**

But now Jesus was dead. He had claimed to be the Lord over life. He had claimed to be ushering in a new kind of Kingdom that would last forever. It had to have crossed the mind of those women at the graveside now that if they hadn't been outright deceived -- they'd certainly given too much credit to Christ's authority. The fact that the tomb was *empty* only made things worse. Death had stolen their dreams, now graverobbers had apparently stolen the corpse. Like grieving families of those taken by the virus, they must have thought: "*We couldn't even get a look at him one last time.*"

It was then, the Scriptures say that **Suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them... "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"** they asked. Don't you know that **He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again. Then they remembered his words'** (Luke 24:4-8).

I have always been struck by this message. What strikes me is what this message ISN'T. The Easter message isn't: Follow Jesus because He was a brilliant teacher; or follow Jesus because He was a good man; or follow Jesus because he is your way to heaven; 'though there's wisdom in all of that. But the central message of Easter is this: "Follow Jesus because He tells you the Truth!" He told you that he would be arrested, executed, and on the third day be raised to new life. And, because more than 500 of the first Christians subsequently had encounters with a Jesus who clearly had conquered the grave, they came to a very logical conclusion. "If Jesus was right about defeating death --the most unlikely proposition of all -- then it only stands to reason that everything else He said to us about life is trustworthy too."

Can we think about what that means for us -- even just in terms of what Jesus told us from the Cross? It means that no matter what my past has been -- even if my sin is to not understand how sin-stained I am -- the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross makes it

possible for me to be forgiven. I can start living today with a completely clean moral record. The debt has been paid! It means that even if you're a thief deserving a cross, there can be a place in Paradise for you, if you'll commit your spirit into God's hands today, for Death has lost its sting. It means that even if your own family has failed you or you them, it is possible for you -- like Mary and John at the foot of Calvary -- to be part of a whole new kind of family, one that will last for all time -- the Church of Jesus Christ. It means that all Christ's talk of a God who thirsts after relationship with you, who understands pain, who will never leave you nor forsake you, that's not fantasy or wishful thinking; it's the gospel truth!

Let me put it in very current terms. What Dr. Anthony Fauci is to the subject of saving our lives from infectious diseases, Jesus is to the subject of finding a more abundant LIFE here and an eternal life beyond this world. Dr. Fauci's been impressively right about this disease and what to do about it. On a vastly larger scale, Jesus has been stunningly right about life and what to do with it. Think about that with me.

Jesus said that big problems and huge blessings come from little SEEDS, so we should pay more attention to the little choices and investments we make. Jesus said that the greatest LIFE is found not in hoarding but in giving yourself away. He said that the greatest POWER lies not in exalting yourself or controlling others but stooping to wash feet and serve others. Jesus said that we are much more than our earthly treasure and that the most enduring WEALTH can build is our loving relationships. Christ said that regardless of the ways we segment our world, we are all FAMILY, bound in a web of mutual dependence by which we thrive or perish, so we must be FOR each other.

One day, months from now, America and the world will experience an epidemiological and economic Easter of sorts. Life will begin to go back to "normal." I am praying, however, that if there is any silver lining in the darkness before that dawn, it will be that you and I and millions of others will develop a passion to define together a new kind of normal. Long ago, a small community of people rooted their lives in the One whose resurrection convinced them that "he knew the **Way**, he was the **Truth**, and he could give **Life** (John 14:6a). In a time of plague, corruption, division and confusion they resolved to live **as Jesus said** and God used that expanding community to bring about a spiritual and cultural renewal that brought a more abundant and eternal life to millions. Why not again? Why not through us? Wherever you are, you can be part of this movement. You can BE the church. For Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

Please pray with me... *Loving Lord, if there is even one person within the sound of my voice who has never before received You into his or her soul, then I ask You to move that precious person to silently repeat this prayer with me: "Jesus, come into my heart today... Wipe away the sin of my past... Fill me with Your Holy Spirit... and lead me in Your Way, Your Truth, and Your Life from this moment forward. Then God, receive the rest of us who this day rededicate ourselves to Your wonderful service. Let the glorious*

truth of Easter shine through our lives today and in all the days to come. For this we pray in the name of Jesus. Hallelujah. Amen.