Against All Odds

## (Luke 9:23-24)

Thank you for joining us today as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord and our God. Today we gather with believers all over the world celebrating that the tomb of Jesus Christ is empty; he’s not there, he is risen just like he said. And so, if you have your Bible, we’re going to begin looking in Luke chapter 9, at verse 23, but that’s just the starting place. And I hope that you are prepared to get into the Word of God today, but more importantly, I pray that you are ready for the Word of God to get into you; because it’s in times like these when we need God’s Word to saturate our hearts, going deep into our souls and into our spirits, speaking life and hope into our lives so that we don’t leave the way we came.

You see, the resurrection is hope, the resurrection is promise, and the resurrection is the testimony of everlasting life, but it all began with a cross. That’s why when Jesus made his appeal for those first disciples to follow him he spoke of a cross. In Luke chapter 9, Jesus said,

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23-24).

One thing that is very obvious is that Jesus did not hide suffering from the conversation. He didn’t sugarcoat his invitation because he knew there was a cross for him and if you want to follow him there will be a cross for you too.

Now, in our contemporary culture of comfort, we don’t have a good theology built around suffering, because suffering doesn’t motivate us, suffering isn’t exciting; but Jesus said clearly if you want to follow me you must deny yourself and take up your cross daily. And this may be a little confusing for us today because you may see the cross as a piece of jewelry, as an emblem of worship, but at the time when Jesus gave this invitation a cross was a means of torture for a convicted criminal. In other words, the cross wasn’t a pretty thing, it was an emblem of suffering, and his invitation was to take up a horrific thing, an accursed thing, an emblem of agony.

As we consider the events of this past week it was a confusing and disorienting time for Jesus followers. In fact, they understood it better in hindsight than they did as they were walking through it. Last week we saw Jesus and his disciples coming into Jerusalem with such pageantry as the crowds were waving palm branches and laying them on the ground before him. They shouted Hosanna, singing and rejoicing, pressing in around Jesus, and even the twelve, those who are called apostles embraced the euphoria of this moment. Because the twelve had left everything to follow Jesus because they believed in him. They walked off their jobs, walked away from their families, because they thought he was bringing the Kingdom of God. They expected that Jesus would overthrow the Roman empire and that he would be their King on earth, but then he started talking all this crazy stuff about dying.

They were looking forward to the coming kingdom, ruling and reigning with Jesus, but he kept talking about dying. He said things like,

“Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19).

Meanwhile, the disciples are looking at one another with bewilderment wondering why he keeps talking about dying. They’re anticipating deliverance from Roman oppression and yet he keeps talking about dying. And so, they’re confused and wondering what he means, what he was talking about when he said,

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24).

The disciples were confused, because he keeps talking about dying, and it didn’t make any sense. Death wasn’t part of their plan, death wasn’t in their perspective, and they just didn’t understand. They heard him mumbling in the garden that night, maybe he was praying, or maybe he was just talking to himself. They watched him struggling, some sort of inner torment, being in anguish, and he prayed more earnestly,

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

They didn’t understand what it all meant, they were exhausted and fell asleep confused. Jesus awoke them and again he was saying something about death, mumbling something about dying…

“And his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44).

They were confused, they didn’t understand why he seemed to be under such pressure, but they trusted him because they had seen him calm a storm before. They had seen him heal the sick and raise the dead and as he got up from prayer and was talking to them, Judas, one of the twelve came into the garden leading the chief priests, elders, and officers of the temple guard.

Judas approached Jesus, identifying him and betraying him with a kiss. They apprehended Jesus and he didn’t say a word, like a lamb he let them take him away, leading him to the house of the high priest. There they accused him and beat him like a slave, nobody knew for sure what was going to happen, but it didn’t look good. The chief priests and Sanhedrin took him from one court to another, bringing him before Pilate where Roman soldiers snatched him up and whipped him like a common criminal. They mocked him and abused him just as Isaiah had said centuries before.

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).

Jesus didn’t resist, he didn’t say anything, he didn’t do any of those miraculous things that they had seen him do over and over again. Sentencing him to die, they laid that crossbeam on Jesus back and made him carry it until he collapsed under its weight. Picking him up they dragged him outside of the city to a place called Golgotha where they fastened him securely to the cross before lifting him up.

With arms stretched wide, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world hung there stripped naked, powerless, almost delirious, saying things that didn’t make any sense. “Forgive them, today you will be with me, here is your son, here is your mother, even changing languages…”

"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" (Matthew 27:46).

Could you imagine what it would be like to be a disciple of Jesus, to have spent three years following him, only to discover that he wasn’t who you thought he was? Could you imagine being there at the foot of the cross and hearing him say,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

And so, most of the disciples fled and hid, because why should they stay if God didn’t? They ran to an upper room and hid, because as much as they had learned from Jesus they still didn’t understand. The man they had believed in to be their deliver had been crucified like a common criminal, and so they hid because they knew if they killed Jesus that they would kill them too.

Now they are locked up in that room not knowing what to believe, not understanding what is real, thinking maybe it doesn’t work, maybe it’s not true. Their lives had literally unraveled before their very eyes, their dreams were crushed as suddenly their Master, their Lord, and their Teacher was gone. Every hope had been destroyed leaving them feeling empty, shocked and grieving in disbelief.

Can you just imagine their confusion? Twelve men who had left everything, they had believed in him, they had depended on him and now there were all these rumors swirling around. They heard rumors that Judas had hung himself, that he had committed suicide, but they were too afraid to go out and see. Then they heard rumors that somebody had broken into his grave and taken his body and their hearts were broken, their hope was gone, and it was over.

They began to discuss what are we going to do now, what are we going to say to our families, maybe we can get our jobs back? When suddenly, some women came to the upper room saying it’s true, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb” (John 20:2). The Bible tells us,

“It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles” (Luke 24:10).

It was these same women that just days before had been there at the cross, they had seen Jesus hanging there, his face bruised and swollen, his body torn and bleeding, and they had seen him give up his spirit and die. Matthew tells us in chapter 28, verse one,

“After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb” (Matthew 28:1).

They too were discouraged and without hope, because they were going to the tomb early that morning bringing spices with which to anoint Jesus dead body. The women knew exactly where the tomb was because they were there when Joseph of Arimathea took custody of Jesus body placing it in his own tomb. They had witnessed the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy,

“He was assigned a grave… with the rich in his death” (Isaiah 53:9).

The high priest Caiaphas, hoping that this whole problem with Jesus would die down in a few days, had convinced Pilate to place soldiers and a Roman seal over the tomb where Jesus was buried; remembering that Jesus had claimed that he would rise again after three days. Finally, he could breathe easier, Jesus was dead and out-of-the-way, but the Bible says that strange things began to happen once again.

“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men” (Matthew 28:2-4).

The soldiers that had been charged to secure the tomb came back into the city shortly after dawn on Sunday reporting a supernatural being coming down from heaven and rolling back that huge stone. They were trembling with terror and the religious leaders couldn’t deny the eyewitness report of these Roman soldiers because they had obviously seen something that had terrified them, causing them to abandon their post.

As all this was going on in Jerusalem, the women arrived at the tomb which was now deserted, where they too encountered the angel who said to them,

"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He’s not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead…” (Matthew 28:5-7).

After seeing the grave clothes lying there in the place where Jesus had been laid, with the cloth still neatly wrapped, yet deflated like an empty cocoon, verse eight tells us,

“The women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Matthew 28:8-10).

The apostle John tells us that when Mary came running to the disciples saying that,

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb” (John 20:2).

Both he and Peter took off running for the tomb. John being the younger of the two men got to the tomb first and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

“Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen” (John 20:5-7).

The disciples recognized that Jesus body wasn’t there, that he was very much alive, and he’d even left his grave clothes behind.

I love this because when Jesus walked out of the tomb, the word impossible was removed from our vocabulary. And we need to understand that when the angel rolled the stone away, it wasn’t to let Jesus out, he rolled the stone away to let us in. We needed to know that his body wasn’t there, that he had been changed, he had walked out of the tomb, his resurrected body had passed through the stone walls of that tomb just like the grave clothes.

The Romans thought they had the problem solved, he was down for the count, he won’t be back, and for three days it looked like he was a liar. The high priest Caiaphas began to breathe easier, for three days he could boast that Jesus was a phony and a fraud, for three days he could laugh and say there was nothing to him. Friday came and went, Saturday came and went, but early Sunday morning without palm branches, nobody singing Hosanna, without anybody to help him out of his grave clothes, without anybody to get him out of the tomb, all by himself Jesus stepped from death into life.

Early Sunday morning Jesus wiped the smile off Caiaphas’ face as he walked out of the grave and met with Mary in the garden. Then he chased down two discouraged disciples that had just left Jerusalem on a seven mile walk back to Emmaus. After walking them home he returned to Jerusalem where ten disciples were locked up for fear of the Jews. The Bible tells us, on that evening,

“…that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" (John 20:19).

Jesus came into the room, walking through the locked door, but Thomas wasn’t there. Jesus came to his disciples, but Judas had committed suicide and Thomas was missing. Thomas who said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" didn’t show up (John 11:16).

Some of you know it’s a lot easier to talk like that when Jesus is raising the dead, when they’re shouting “Hosanna,” but when they start arresting people, when the blood starts flying, and the crowd starts shouting “Crucify him” it’s a whole other story. And so, Thomas wasn’t in the room, Thomas had gone for a walk, because he’s not sure about this, he doesn’t know what he believes anymore, a dead Savior is complicated, and he’s just confused.

Finally, when he decided to climb the stairs and go into the upper room the other disciples told him,

“We have seen the Lord!" (John 20:25).

And they started telling him how Jesus was just there a little while ago, “you just missed him,” and Jesus said this, and Jesus said that. But Thomas wouldn’t believe it because he knew that they took him down from the cross after the Roman soldier had pierced his side. He knew they had wrapped him in a burial cloth and laid him in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb because he was stone cold dead. He knew they had rolled a stone in front of the tomb, and so he says, “I won’t believe it…”

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side…" (John 20:25).

I love what happens next because Jesus came back for one guy who was struggling to believe. Thomas had allowed skepticism to invade his faith and he began to rely upon the rational instead of the supernatural and he wasn’t even sure what he believed anymore, and yet Jesus came back for him.

“A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them" (John 20:26).

Jesus showed up making an encore appearance for one person who didn’t even believe. And maybe it wasn’t so much that Thomas had lost his faith, but he was just struggling with his faith, because the very fact that he came back and climbed the stairs signifies that he still had questions, he wasn’t sure. Once again John tells us,

“Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" (John 20:26).

Jesus came back for Thomas and gave him the opportunity that would change the course of his life forever. He gave him the opportunity to see his wounds, he said, “Thomas, come here and feel this…”

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27).

Jesus’ invitation to his followers was “take up your cross and follow me” and then he led the way. When you see his wounds, seeing where he bled, seeing where he suffered, it does something deep inside.

Thomas was overwhelmed with emotion because Jesus came to get him, he came through the door and said, “Touch me where they hurt me, touch me where I was bleeding,” because Jesus knew that Thomas had places that were hurting too. And so, he showed him his wounds so that Thomas could let go of his wounds on the inside, deep wounds of disappointment, wounds of doubt and fear, wounds that no man could see. Jesus was touched by his feelings, he had compassion on him, and Thomas said, “My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Now, I’ve never seen Jesus like that, I’ve never touched Jesus like that, but I believe there is a God who loves us when everyone else walks out on us. I believe there is a God who walks with us through every stage of life, who never wastes a tear, never wastes a pain, and even though…

“Weeping may remain for a night but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Psalms 30:5).

And I believe that one day I’m going to step out of this earthly body, leaving this tent behind, and stepping into a new body and an everlasting house. I believe that because he said he was going to prepare a place for me. He said,

“If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:2-3).

And so, I believe that he died on the cross for my sin so that I could be with him forever. I believe that he did that for me, and I am justified before God because I believe. That is the good news of the gospel, that is the point of this message, we have a God that makes house calls. He will come for one person who is doubting, questioning, struggling with the disappointment of unmet expectations. Today I wonder if you are that one?

As we close, there may be some of you who need to respond to that knocking on the door of your heart, responding to Jesus’ invitation to come follow him. He rose Against All Odds and today you need to stop doubting because there is so much more. There is something that comes after this, after the resurrection, and the Bible says,

“God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6).

Jesus invites you to come follow him so that you may be seated with him in glory. I believe there are some of you who have been hiding at home, or maybe hiding in the back row, and it’s time to come out. It’s time to move to the front row, it’s time to take a stand for Jesus, because there’s another level that God is calling you to. Jesus promises in Revelation chapter 3,

“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Revelation 3:21).

In other words, Jesus saved a seat for you, you will be seated with him, you will sit with him on his throne. What was once faith will become sight, but right now it’s time to move forward, it’s time to step up, to reach out and stop doubting and believe. To those who overcome, against all odds, Jesus is saving a seat for you.

As we close, if you need to get back to where God has called you, if there have been doubts and questions, I want you to know that the stone has been rolled away, the price has been paid, and there is a place reserved for you. If you have been challenged to step up, to respond to his invitation to deny yourself, to take up your cross daily, and follow him, would you take a step of faith today. Even if your hands are trembling and shaking like those women as they left the tomb, even if you’re staring at a large stone, some impossible situation, chains you can’t break, even if you feel like you’ve wasted too much time, you need to know that God can redeem what is left, he can resurrect every mistake, but it begins with a step of faith. Would you tell God, I want to believe, help me in my unbelief?

Pastor John Talcott

Christ’s Community Church

303 West Lincoln Avenue

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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(301) 447-4224

[www.cccaog.org](http://www.cccaog.org)

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