

THE END OF DEATH'S SEPARATION

Fifth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on Understanding and Repairing Our Relationships from Luke 24:33-43
EASTER 2006

"They still could not believe it for joy and were marveling." Luke 24:41

Just how padlocked is the grave? Belatedly, since it's now in season number five, I've become a fan of "24", the hour-by-hour drama of the Counter Terrorism Unit, where Kiefer Sutherland stars as intrepid agent, Jack Bauer, who races each week from one crisis to the next in a never-ending quest to save the nation and expose corruption at the highest levels of the American government.

Previously on "24" Bauer and the brother of the assassinated President Palmer break into the home of a bank manager in Los Angeles. At gunpoint they order him to open the vault of his bank where they expect to obtain taped evidence that proves the sitting President of the United States is a co-conspirator with terrorists who have already killed scores of our fellow citizens. "I can't open the vault," the manager says. Bauer swings his gun so it points at the man's wife. (These are desperate times, after all!) The bank manager rushes to explain. "It's not that I won't open the vault," he says. "I can't! It has a time lock that prevents it from being opened until the start of business tomorrow." "Come on," Bauer growls. "Don't play games with me. Every bank has an override procedure—a secret code held by the manager that enables him to open the vault in an emergency." The manager relents, and he and Bauer drive off to open the safe.

So, what about death? The vault door has slammed shut. It is locked and bolted. We all, here today, have loved ones who have passed beyond. We have stood angry with impotence before the sealed tomb. No communication flows through the hardened steel of the grave. No tapping message, no signal emerges from the other side. Only silence. And the choking sobs of our sorrow that we closet in the darkness of the night. Is there an override? Is there a secret code in the hands of the Manager of the Universe that can turn the tumblers, retract the iron prongs, swing back the vault door to restore to us our loved ones held within? Or are they lost to us forever? A number of years ago I was in India and I stood in a public crematorium and watched a family light the pyre that would burn the body of the family patriarch. Their heart-wrenching wails lifted into the air. Their grief was profound, because for them, there was absolutely no hope that they would ever see their beloved father again. Ever. The collective experience of the human race would render the same verdict: There is no coming back from death. Except for what happened one April dawn 2000 years ago. Turn with me to a better "24"—the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke. Here we will observe three things. **1. Unexpected Reports, 2. Unbelievable Reality, and 3. Unending Reunion.**

1. Unexpected Reports. Jesus was dead. Some of his followers had watched his agonizing death by crucifixion. They had seen the spear penetrate his lungs and heart and the collected fluids pour from the rupture. They had observed men cut his body down and hurry with it to a nearby tomb. They had seen the stone drop into its slotted niche and block their entrance and his exit. Yes, Jesus was dead. The grave was the final statement. The disciples still reeled from the shock. One moment he had been there with them, alive and strong. The next, he had been snatched by death, the great thief, and by

men who wielded it as an awful weapon. So Saturday had passed. The Passover these friends of Jesus observed that day was grim with sorrow. Some of you know how a holiday feels when the family gathers, but one is missing.

But with Sunday's dawn strange, fragmentary reports began drifting in, like the first words in a breaking news story. Several of the women had gone to the tomb intending to wash and anoint Jesus' body. They came racing back with tales that the stone was rolled back and that they'd met men in white who had said Jesus was risen from the dead. More rational minds, of course, discounted the women's nonsense. Probably they'd gotten confused and gone to the wrong tomb. Nevertheless, there might be some reality behind their report. Maybe the tomb had been raided in the night. Peter and John ran to investigate and returned saying that the tomb was indeed empty, and John had seen the bloodstained shroud that wrapped the body neatly folded and lying on the stone bench inside. Mary Magdalene, who'd been with the original group of women, had lingered in the cemetery. She'd been sure the grave had been broken into, and through tear-blurred eyes thought she saw the gardener, early arrived for work. She figured he might know where Jesus' body had been carried. But she burst into the upper room out of breath. It had really been Jesus she'd seen! He was alive. She'd actually hugged him! Crazy Mary. "Settle down, girl. Your imagination's getting the better of you. It doesn't happen like that."

Some time before Mary made her report, a believer named Cleopas stopped by the upper room to make his goodbyes before setting out for home. He'd been in Jerusalem for the Passover and, like the rest of them, had been blind-sided by the death of Jesus. He lived in the town of Emmaus, some seven miles northwest of Jerusalem. He'd waited through the Passover, for one couldn't travel on the Sabbath. He'd intended to get an early start on his journey home, but the first reports coming in had disturbed him, and he'd lingered to discuss with the gathering disciples what they might mean. At last he departed, stopped at the house where he'd been staying to pick up his few belongings. The rumors were disconcerting, but nothing was going to change. Jesus was dead. Around noon, he and a companion—perhaps it was his wife—started out on the four-hour walk to Emmaus.

Along the way they were joined by a fellow traveler. They fell into conversation and talk naturally turned to the events of the past three days, and to the troubling reports about the empty grave. The man seemed incredibly ignorant about what had occurred. They filled him in. "*We were hoping,*" they said, "*that it was [Jesus] who was going to redeem Israel.*" But, they sighed, "This is the third day now since he was killed. (v 21) Their companion, instead of being sympathetic, began to chide them. "You should know your Bible better," he told them. And he began with the book of Genesis and pulled out verse after verse after another to demonstrate that the prophets had foreseen it all. The Messiah would die and be resurrected from the dead. And suddenly they arrived in Emmaus. They invited their friend to come in and have a meal with them and to stay the night. No, he said, he really must keep going. But they persuaded him to remain. When supper was ready they asked the man who knew the Bible so well if he would say the prayer to bless the meal, and he did. When he picked up the loaf of bread and broke it

and began to pass it, his sleeves drew back, and that's when they saw his hands. There were nail holes in them. They peered more closely at his face which until now had probably been covered by a hood. It was Jesus! Then suddenly he was gone! Cleopas and his wife—if that's who she was—stared at each other. Luke 24:33 says, *“They arose that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them.”*

2. Unbelievable Reality. I love the description of the reception these two received when they arrived back at the upper room with what they thought was a news scoop. Verse 34 says that the others cut them off. *“The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon,”* they exclaimed. That's where Jesus had gone when he vanished from Emmaus. He'd met privately with Peter! They all began talking at once, each one telling and retelling what he or she had experienced. It was now certain that something no one had ever experienced before was taking place. The world had shifted on its axis. All of human history had turned in the space of fourteen hours. You can imagine the verbal pandemonium. Then verse 36 says, *“While they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst.”*

I want you to see how hard it is to change your view of reality. They were convincing themselves that Jesus must be alive. Everything they had previously thought about death and its finality was being contradicted in those minutes. And yet, notice the immediate reaction of Jesus' followers when he suddenly appeared. Verse 37 says, *“They were startled and frightened and thought they were seeing a spirit.”* They thought Jesus was a ghost. He was alive, but he couldn't really be alive. This is so human. It has the ring of truth about it. Jesus told them to examine the facts. I'm going to paraphrase verse 39. Jesus said, “Look at my hands and my feet. Look! There are holes here where the nails tore through. Have you ever seen anything like this before? How many people do you know who bear the scars of crucifixion? You don't know anybody, do you? Because they're all dead. But I'm not dead, am I? You think I'm a ghost? Ghosts don't have flesh and blood. They don't have bones. Touch and feel. Convince yourselves.”

Look at verse 41. *“They still could not believe it for joy.”* Do you know what that is saying? What they were looking at was clearly impossible. And yet reality was staring them in the face and was talking to them. They had to believe the unbelievable because there was no other option. And then Jesus delivered the ultimate proof of being alive. He said to them, *“Have you anything here to eat?”* I'm starving! Haven't had a meal since Thursday night when I was with you guys. I thought I was going to get supper with Cleopas—I was afraid they'd never get that meal cooked in Emmaus—but then before I could eat any of it, they recognized me and I had to leave.” There was laughter and somebody stumbled into the kitchen and returned with a piece of broiled fish on a plate, and Jesus gobbled it down. Friends, ghosts don't eat! Dead people don't eat!

3. Unending Reunion. Is the vault that seals in the dead securely locked? Oh yes, but the Manager who holds the override code has punched in the secret numbers and the huge steel door has swung open. You can imagine the joyous celebration that must have broken out in the upper room that night. I've seen film interpretations of the upper

room where Jesus and the disciples are somber and serious and everything said is weighted with gravity. How dumb can film-makers be? The pot bubbled over! They were laughing and joking. This party was a joy-filled reunion between people who loved each other and thought they'd lost each other forever. But it was also a time of tenderness. Mary, the mother of Jesus was undoubtedly present. You can hear Jesus say to her, "Hi, Mom," as he swept her into his arms with a big hug.

Does this have any application for you and me? You'd better believe it! The New Testament is absolutely clear. Let me read to you a couple of passages that speak about what Jesus' resurrection means. In I Corinthians 15, for example, after the apostle Paul has recounted the various resurrection appearances of Jesus to prove beyond any shadow of doubt that Christ really has risen, he says in verses 21-23, "*Since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. As in Adam all die*"—that is, every son and daughter of Adam—all of us—die because of our sin—"*so also in Christ all shall be made alive.*" That is, all who trust in Christ will live. "*But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming.*" So, he's saying that when Jesus returns to earth, there will be a resurrection from the dead. Verse 52: "*In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead in Christ will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*" I Thessalonians 4:16-17. explains further, "*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.*"

And with each other! The other evening Barb and I were sorting through a stack of old papers and clippings we have saved through the years, and there was a pile of photographs from 35 years ago. One of them was a gag shot of my mom and dad. They looked good, in their early fifties. They were camping and apparently collecting firewood, for my dad was bending over, holding a long branch under his chin, and he had a goofy expression on his face. And my mom, with a big grin, was holding an axe over his neck, as if she was getting ready to chop dad's head off. And I thought, I haven't seen either one of them now in ten years. I haven't heard a word from them. I wished I could slip into that photograph for just a few moments to laugh with them and tell them how I'm doing, how Barb and our sons are doing. To let them know that now they have a great-granddaughter who thinks she is the Center of the Universe. But they are beyond my reach. Ten years ago I conducted their funeral services and laid them in the ground. Their resting place is marked with a brass plate. The door of death is bolted shut. I cannot push through and they cannot come back. But it will not always be that way.

On the last night Jesus and his disciples spent together, at that last supper before his crucifixion, Jesus said to his friends, "*I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom.*" (Matthew 26:29) And indeed, he didn't, not in the upper room on Easter, nor later by the Sea of Galilee. But there is an interesting prophecy in the book of Isaiah written 750 years before Jesus came. "*The Lord will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a*

banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine. And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, even the veil which is stretched over all nations. He will swallow up death for all time. And the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken. And it will be said in that day, 'Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.'" (Isaiah 26:6-9)

For whom do you grieve this day? Who has slipped over the boundaries of death who you long to see again, to hold and to kiss and to laugh with and to love? Is it a husband or a wife? Is it your mother or your father? Is it a child or a grandchild who has died too soon? Is it a beloved friend, a mentor, a teacher, a spiritual confidant? Who do you fear that you have lost forever, or whose life now hangs by tentative fingers to the realm of the living? Here is the hope. Here is reality. Here is the end of death's separation. Jesus died and rose again from the dead so that those who love Jesus, who have forsaken their sin and have cast themselves upon his mercy, will live again! On the day that Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise from the grave. They will put on immortal bodies, flesh and blood bodies, that need food and the hospitable provision of the good earth. They will laugh and call out. Their eyes will see, their ears will hear, and with celebration that will never fade away their shouts will echo through the ages to come. And you can be there, reunited with those you love, if you trust in Jesus. Dear friends, this is real. It is true. It will surely happen. Because Christ is risen!

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