

“Issue in Doubt”

Luke 24:1-12

A Sermon Delivered by

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Easter Sunday, 31 March 2013

United States Naval Academy Chapel

*Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.*

In order to understand where our story from Luke’s Gospel finds its place in the great sweep of events, I need your help. Imagine if you will that all is blackness. Even close your eyes and imagine that all is dark - there is no sky, no earth, no sun or moon, no stars. There is only dark, swirling chaos. All is formless and void without order or purpose. Darkness covers the face of the deep. Into this formless void God, the immutable and unchanging, spoke...and the world came into existence. God spoke and the sea was divided from the dry land. God spoke and the sun was formed in the heavens to rule the day, and the moon to rule the night. God spoke and the earth became fruitful, teeming with life. God spoke and man, a living creature, was given dominion over the earth, and came into being. And God saw all that He had created and it called it good.

But then God watched as that which he created good was invaded by the cancer of sin and rebellion. God watched as men stumbled over their own vices, cheating themselves of their birthright. God sent the Law and the prophets to call them back to repentance, but they were insufficient to turn the hearts of men back to Him. And there was silence. 400 years of silence when no special word from God was given to the people, no prophetic voice crying out in the land warning or encouraging. A famine had come, not of food or water, but of the word of the Lord.

Then the most wonderful thing happened. God spoke again. And His Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, glory as the only begotten Son of God. Jesus

came, and humanity resonated with Him. Here was a Man who seemed to be a light piercing the darkness. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, cast out demons, and spoke with power that not even the scribes could rival. His life carried that irrefutable sense of joy and authority that seemed to move mountains. He said that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that it would grow like a mustard seed – small and imperceptible at first but eventually flowering as the greatest tree in the garden. And His followers saw this, at least the beginnings of this kingdom. All around him people were drawn, moved by his compassion, freed by His love, and gripped by his piercing engagement with the religious leaders. This kingdom that he'd promised was coming and His disciples could see it.

But they could also see a growing opposition. In fact it seemed that the greater his works and the greater his following, the greater the animus and hostility of the religious leaders. He entered Jerusalem amidst the throngs of crowds praising His coming and lauding his name, and yet behind it all there was a tension that was palpable. Then came Thursday night of the Passover week. One of His own, for reasons we cannot fully know, turned Him over into the hands of his enemies. He was arrested and made to stand before rulers of men. He was beaten and mocked and ridiculed. And then on Friday, the unthinkable happened. He was sentenced to death on a cross. For His disciples it was surreal. The victory he'd promised now seemed impossible as death and defeat loomed imminent. The mission they'd given their lives to, that had been years in the making, that had been invested with such promise and urgency and longing was failing. Jesus, the One in whom they'd placed all their trust was led away to die. Their dreams were dashed. They were demoralized. Despair descended. There was nothing left to do but cut their losses, pull back to their quiet lives, and abandon the great purpose to which they had been called.

This predicament of the disciples reminds me of another mission on the brink of failure from our more recent past. Just after 10 o'clock on the morning of November 20<sup>th</sup> 1943, as the first waves of U.S. Marines were landing on the island of Tarawa to fight a ferocious and unrelenting Japanese enemy, Colonel David Shoup, Commanding Officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Regiment hunkered down on the beach next to his radio operator and assessed the situation. This sweeping mission that had been invested with such careful planning, urgency, and so many

human lives, was in jeopardy. Tarawa had, for months, been the epicenter of planning for the war in the South Pacific. Not only was it the first time the Marine Corps would test the full effect of its amphibious doctrine; but it would be the hinge upon which the entire island campaign would turn and the test case for another, more massive landing that was being planned for Europe the following summer - D-Day, June 6<sup>th</sup>. And now this great effort, upon which so much rested, to which so many had given themselves in the hopes of victory and peace, was unraveling fast. As Colonel Shoup looked out on the beaches of Tarawa that morning, the sight was unimaginable. Already several of his battalions had suffered up to 70% casualties, with whole platoons of Marines killed. Scores of Landing crafts had been obliterated by Japanese heavy guns and artillery as they struggled to navigate the coral reef. 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion 8<sup>th</sup> Marines, led by Major Robert Ruud, had lost over half its men before even reaching the sea wall – wiped out as they waded hundreds of meters ashore in the face of withering Japanese machine gun fire. By mid-day the ocean ran red as bloody Tarawa descended into chaos.

Assessing the situation just a few hundred meters from Colonel Shoup was Major John Schoettel, a battalion commander caught in the worst of the fight. Looking out on the chaos and carnage that was happening all around him, he radioed back to Colonel Shoup three words that no one ever wanted to hear – “Issue in doubt”. The actual transmission reads like this:

0959 - Major Schoettel to Colonel Shoup: Receiving heavy fire all along beach. Unable to land all. **Issue in doubt.**

1007 - Schoettel to Shoup: Boats held up on reef of right flank Red One. Troops receiving heavy fire in water.

1015 - Colonel Shoup to Major Schoettel: Land Beach Red Two and work west.

1018 - Schoettel back to Shoup: We have nothing left to land.

Issue in doubt – it’s a phrase that every Infantry Commander knows and yet none ever wants to repeat. It means that in all likelihood victory is impossible, defeat is imminent. It means the mission is on the brink of failure and there’s nothing to do but cut losses, pull back, and abandon the effort. When Schoettel’s radio transmission was heard by the command staff just off the coast on board the USS Maryland, it sent an instant chill into the hearts of those

directing the battle. Issue in doubt - these words had only been spoken once before in U.S. history; and that was at Wake Island as our troops were being completely overwhelmed by the Japanese. This mission that had been months, even longer, in the planning, that had been invested with such promise and vision and urgency was failing.

And so it was on Good Friday, 2,000 years earlier. 11 disciples looked out on a scene of unimaginable loss - a blood-stained cross and the body of Jesus once full of life and power and love, now broken and lifeless. The situation seemed hopeless, the mission a failure. Victory was impossible and defeat was all but final. The issue was most certainly in doubt. But then came Sunday morning. The Bible tells us that three women – Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary the mother of James – arrived at the tomb with spices to prepare the body for burial which was the custom. But when they arrived, they found the massive stone rolled away. Suddenly two angels in dazzling white stood before them, saying, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He’s not here. He’s risen! Don’t you remember how He spoke to you while He was with you, saying that all of this must happen? That the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day, rise again.” “Why do you look for the living among the dead? At once the women remembered Jesus’ words and ran back to tell the others all they’d seen. Soon after, Jesus came and stood in their midst - His body once broken was now alive and radiant and full of power and love and joy.

The truth is, to Jesus, the issue never was in doubt. From the beginning, He’d told His disciples these things would happen. But they couldn’t or wouldn’t hear his message; and so when the hour of trial came, and the enemies closed in, doubt and despair descended and the disciples scattered. It’s been 2,000 years since these events, and we have the great privilege of being able to look back and learn. And yet in spite of all of this, we suffer from the very same problem as the disciples. We forget that Jesus has already won the victory. The issue is never in doubt...it never was! Before going to Iraq in 2003, I remember a young Corporal coming to me in the middle of the desert at 29 Palms and asking, “Chaplain, can the Marine Corps kick you out for adultery?” I said, “Corporal is there something you need to share?” He shared with me how he’d been unfaithful to his wife on a recent deployment, and how his wife had just found out. Well I began to meet with the couple and after one or two meetings, I was confident the

marriage was over. Not because the wife was unwilling to forgive him – I think somewhere she wanted to, and she was a person of faith - but because the Corporal hadn't shown any genuine remorse. I remember him saying to his wife in front of me in the office, in effect, 'Look I'm sorry, can we just move on and forget it?' We deployed to Iraq, the marriage barely hanging on, and I was almost certain she wouldn't be there when he returned. I could understand that.

But something began to happen to this young Marine in the desert. I began to notice that on occasion he would stumble into the back of the worship services that I would conduct in the field – not say anything, but just quietly slip in and out. It was Palm Sunday, 2003, almost 10 years ago this week. And I was conducting a service on the outskirts of Baghdad. As the service began, I noticed this Corporal join the crowd. It's amazing, as intense as that time was I remember exactly what we talked about that day. We talked about how Christ makes His triumphal entry into our lives and the changes He begins to make when we welcome Him in. It was a beautiful service, worshipful, peaceful, which was surprising considering where we were and that just a couple days before we'd been in a fierce firefight. At the end of the service, I noticed that this young Marine was still there and he was crying. So I went to him and said, "Corporal, why are you crying?" He looked at me and said, "for the first time in my life, I realize what I've done to my wife." And I looked at him and said, "Corporal for the first time in my life, I think your marriage has a chance."

His tears were evidence of the Spirit of God moving in his heart, changing him, quickening him to new life. In the months that followed, he joined a Bible study and I watched him begin growing in his faith. My last memory of that Marine was baptizing him in the ocean off the coast of Camp Pendleton as his wife and daughter stood on the shore watching, smiling ear to ear with joy and forgiveness and reconciliation. What a miracle, what a victory!

You see if Christ has been raised from the dead, if sin and death have already been conquered, if the issue of His victory is not in doubt, then there are NO ISSUES in our lives that are beyond the reach of his redemption. When we invite Jesus Christ into our lives, we get all of him. Romans 8 says "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies by the same Spirit who lives

in you.” This is so important because sometimes I think we imagine that when we become a Christian it’s as if we get a little part of Jesus. Almost like the image of the man who has a little angel sitting on one shoulder and a cute little devil sitting on another. Nothing could be further from the truth. When we open our lives to the power and presence of Jesus, the same Lord who healed the sick, cast out evil, touched the lepers and broke open the grave, floods into our hearts. It doesn’t mean that everything changes at once...we still have sin to deal with. But now all those things we thought impossible or beyond remedy, all those areas where we have pronounced a silent verdict or sentence of death...there is now hope.

This is why the Scripture says, “With man this is impossible but with God all things are possible.” And “What then shall we say, if God is for us, who can be against us?” And “in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” These aren’t just positive thoughts, they come from the reality that JESUS IS ALIVE, and when the risen Lord makes His home in our hearts, no issue is beyond redemption, no trial is beyond the power to bear it with grace and strength, even death itself is translated forever. For if Christ has been raised, so we who believe in Him will also be raised to eternal life. “O death where is your victory? O death where is your sting?”

On a Saturday morning in November of 1943, Colonel David Shoup looked out on withering enemy fire and overwhelming loss of life and heard those ominous words on the radio, “issue in doubt.” And for a time, he thought about abandoning the mission. But something happened that afternoon and into the dawn of the next day, Sunday...the Marines kept coming. Even in the midst of unbelievable odds and sacrifice, the Marines kept coming. Relentless as the sea itself, the Marines, God bless em,’ kept coming. By Sunday morning Colonel Shoup began to see the possibility of a different ending to the story. The losses had been great but the momentum had begun to shift. The indomitable spirit that is the Marine Corps began to push forward, not only in his men, but in his heart. And so in the afternoon, of Sunday, November 21<sup>st</sup>, he issued a radio transmission that has forever become immortalized in the history of courage in battle:

RADIO TRANSMISSION

FROM: Colonel David Shoup

TO: General Julian Smith

21 November 1943, Sunday

1600:

CASUALTIES – MANY; PERCENTAGE DEAD – UNKNOWN

COMBAT EFFICIENCY – WE ARE WINNING!

Brothers and sisters, I don't know what kind of situation you're in, or what brought you here today, or the kind of losses you've experienced in your life. You may feel like you're on a withering beach barely hanging on. No matter how difficult the outlook may seem, no matter how relentless the enemy has been, no matter how improbable the victory in your life or your circumstances, if Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives, we are winning! Victory is certain. The ISSUE IS NEVER IN DOUBT. Will you choose to open your eyes of faith and see Him today? Will you look up and see Him, walking in the midst of the battle, His Body not bruised and broken but alive and new and radiant, waving His banner of love and power and triumph over our lives. Friday he died. But today is Easter. Today and forever He lives! He lives to make us new. He waits to make us new. He says, "Look unto Me and be saved all you ends of the earth, for I am God and there is none other like Me."

They that have ears to hear let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.