

April 18, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Psalm 4](#); [Luke 24:36–48](#)

TITLE: Getting a Good Night's Sleep

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Imagine it's the end of the day. The sun has set; the day's work is over. Doors are locked; house lights are turned off; you are in bed and under the covers. No more TV, no more phones, no more books or magazines. You yawn and let your head hit the pillow. But for some reason, you can't get to sleep. Is the room too hot or too cold? Are the kids still rustling around or does the dog need to be let out again? Your body is tired but your mind is wide awake. You're lying still, but your monkey brain is racing a mile a minute. So what can you do when you need a good night's sleep?

I know this is a risky topic—preaching a sermon about sleep. I've seen some of you nodding off in the pews. With these live stream services, this is even riskier since half of you are watching this service still wearing your pajamas.

I generally sleep pretty well at night—about 7 ½ hours straight. But there are times when I can't sleep—or when I doze off for a while but find myself awake at 2 or 3 in the morning with my mind racing and sleep nowhere to be found. I keep a notepad next to my bed to jot things down that wake me up in the night, so I can deal with them in the morning. If it's bigger things than that, I'll go downstairs—drink some milk, read a bit, and then eventually return to bed, hoping that sleep will grace me with its healing presence once more.

Why do we sleep anyway? Scientists aren't entirely sure. Some have suggested we sleep as a way to conserve energy that will be needed when the sun is up and we have to forage for food or work for a living. Most believe sleep helps restore our body. It's a time to repair our tissues and muscles, synthesize new proteins and release the hormones that keep us healthy when we are awake. Experts on the brain also insist that sleep plays a critical role in allowing our brain to process what it has learned during the day. Babies sleep about 13–14 hours a day with about half that time spent in REM sleep, which involves dreaming and brain activity. And lots of studies have shown that sleep deprivation negatively affects our ability to learn and function efficiently. That's why Shakespeare called sleep “nature's gentle nurse.”

There is something amazing about sleep. The comedian George Carlin once remarked: “People say ‘I'm going to sleep now’ as if it were nothing. But it's really a bizarre activity. For the next several hours, I'm going to become unconscious, temporarily losing control over everything I know and understand. When the sun returns, I will resume my life.” He's right! Sleep is an unusual type of surrender, a laying down of arms. Whatever work you're up to your eyeballs in, whatever joys or sorrows you're feeling—all of this is set aside as you drift off into oblivion. For a while you give up being in charge of your life and put yourself into the hands of the night—and, more specifically, into the hands of the One who created both day and night.

That last comment is actually quite important. A few years ago, a study in *Psychology Today* suggested that religious people actually sleep better, with those who regularly attended church services more likely to report better sleep quality. (And again, I'm pretty sure they meant at night as opposed to sleeping during the service itself.) Part of this was linked to their belief that God is active in their lives. One researcher commented "*If you believe a higher power is out there looking out for you, then what you're going through now is temporary;...Faith reduces stress by giving you a sense of hope and reducing sadness, thereby letting you sleep better.*"¹ It's like the old saying of Victor Hugo's: *Go to sleep in peace. God is awake.*

Now, I want you to think about these things as we re-visit some of the bible stories related to Jesus' resurrection on Easter. All the resurrection appearances of Christ happened during waking hours of the day. The women went to the tomb early in the morning and there they encountered the risen Christ. The disciples had gathered in the upper room when suddenly Christ appeared in their midst. Two disciples walked along the road back home to Emmaus when Jesus joined them. Simon Peter was out fishing on the Sea of Galilee when Christ called to him from the shore and invited him to join him for a special meal. This may not seem like such a surprising fact; the risen Christ simply might have chosen to appear to his followers mostly during daytime. But remember: All four gospels were written years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The earliest were written 30-40 years after that first Easter with John's gospel written 50 or more years after the fact. So maybe there is something else involved in the choice of resurrection stories we've been given in scripture.

Put yourself in the place of the first disciples and ask yourself a simple question: How well would I have slept those first nights after Christ's Easter resurrection? I don't think I'd have slept very well. My mind would have been racing. Jesus had risen from the dead. He'd appeared in the flesh. He'd torn down the curtain that used to separate the living from the dead. What did it all mean?

I can imagine that the gospels were written as answers to the Easter questions that kept the early church awake at night. Think about the order of events in the passage which Heather and I read from Luke 24. You're lying awake in bed, anxious and unsure what this Easter message truly means, so the first thing Luke records is Christ's calming voice saying "Peace be with you." Your rational monkey brain is sure that the only way Jesus could appear in that room before the disciples is because he was actually a ghost, so the second thing Luke has Jesus say is, "*Look at me. Touch me. Does a ghost have flesh and bones like I do?*" Maybe then you might wonder whether Christ was now totally different from us and would no longer relate to our worries, pains and insignificant human lives. So to put that doubt to rest, Christ next asks for something to eat and quietly eats some fish like a regular ol' guest at the dinner table.

After saying in effect, "Peace. I'm not a ghost. I'm still just like you and care for each of you," Jesus cut to the chase and tells all of us the important things we should remember (as opposed to all the secondary things that only disturb our sleep). He reminds us that the scriptures and prophecies of old were fulfilled by the events of his life, death and

resurrection. The Messiah, the Christ, had to suffer and then rise from the dead so that a new truth might be announced to the world. Forgiveness is now made real. A new beginning has dawned. God's love, Christ's redeeming grace, and the Spirit's reviving power are now active in the world.

Then Jesus really gives us something to think about. He said "You are witnesses of these things." We are the ones to live out this story and tell this story. Nothing else matters in light of this good news. The gospels don't try to tell us everything about the risen Christ. They only answer the persistent questions that were likely keeping believers awake at night and then they re-focus our minds on what is more important, so we can all finally get a good night's sleep.

That's why I love pairing the Luke resurrection stories with the simple verses from little Psalm 4. It begins with a voice crying out in the night, "*O God, answer me when I call! Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.*" It reminds us not be troubled in the late hours, when it says *When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it in your beds and be silent.* And then it ends with words of confident faith, saying in full trust: *O Lord, I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone make me lie down in safety.*

We proclaim the gospel story about Christ's resurrection during the daytime so that the world might sleep peacefully at night. Yes, I know there is still much that troubles us. These remain uncertain and difficult times. There are diseases and tragic accidents, violent shootings and international tensions, broken relationships between people and races, money woes, job woes, and stress that dogs our every waking hour. But those things have never been the full story. We go to sleep, but God is awake. We close our eyes, but God's creative work is only beginning. We lie down in safety and peace, and in the morning the living Christ greets us with grace and love and a promise never to leave or forsake us. We are witnesses of these things.

So rest assured—literally, rest assured. This world remains a miraculous place. You've sensed that something deeper and transcendent and loving is active all around you. You know resurrection is true in your gut and in your spirit. So be a witness of these things. And the peace of Christ be with you as you lie down to sleep and when you awake to God's new day.

AMEN

¹ "Do Religious People Really Sleep Better?", Psychology Today. July 23, 2018, by Seth Gillihan; "Faith Makes for a Good Night's Sleep, Study Says," Religion News Service, January 16, 2019, by Paul O'Donnell