

Beyond the Idle Tale

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Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise

again.”⁸ Then they remembered his words,⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Psalm 118:1,14-17

¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! ¹⁴ The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.¹⁵ There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:” The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; ¹⁶ the right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.” ¹⁷ I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.

One of my longtime preaching colleagues loved to ask at Easter, wouldn't it be revealing to set up a polygraph test for everyone streaming into the church for Easter worship? It is an absurd suggestion, a practical impossibility, he mused, but it would be interesting to get a reading on how many would confidently declare, with no discernable rise in heart rate, "I believe ... on the third day he rose again from the dead." This old seasoned preacher would go on to say, "I suspect there is a doubter in us all, just as there is a believer in us all." ¹

Regardless of where you might find yourself on the imagined polygraph spectrum of belief in the resurrection, and especially to any who may harbor a bit of skepticism, the word for everyone today is Welcome. Welcome to the full-throttled faithful content to let your spirits soar on ascending Alleluias; and welcome to those who hear this story of resurrection and wish there were just a bit more empirical proof. The gospel proclamation makes room for all of us the way it announces the resurrection by wrapping it in mystery, awe and wonder.

Luke is especially welcoming of those who worship today with an honest mixture of believing and questioning. The women who went to the tomb at early dawn expected to find the body of their beloved Jesus, but they encountered only emptiness. The messengers in dazzling clothes appeared saying, "He is not here, but has risen... remember what he told you, that he would be handed over, crucified and on the third day he would be

¹ P.C. Enniss, "Too Preposterous to Believe," Journal for Preachers, Easter, 2003.

raised. Then, with that angelic prompt, they recalled what Jesus had said, and ran to tell the disciples.

But their friends dismissed their proclamation as an idle tale, best translated as utter nonsense. In fact, the Greek word for idle tale is the basis of our word delirium - a mental state that causes confusion and disorientation. Who can blame them? No matter the messenger, Easter's newness IS hard to get our minds around. But Luke names the women - Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James - as if to say - these are reliable witnesses. Only then does Peter put that idle tale to the test; curious, he ran to see for himself. All he found was folded linen cloths. Not much evidence, not much proof, but puzzling enough to amaze him. Puzzling enough to amaze US too if we pause and think about those folded linen cloths.

For the other gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and John, the resurrection is the climactic end to their story of Jesus; but that's not the case for Luke. Yes, it comes toward the end of the gospel, but Luke's telling did not end there. Luke is the one gospel writer with a sequel - the Acts of the Apostles. So for Luke the resurrection is the very center of his proclamation. Everything radiates from it. Luke invites us to make sense of the women's idle tale by remembering back to the beginning and then looking far beyond to how the truth of it empowers the church to carry this good news to the world. We have just heard that what brought Peter to amazement was seeing those folded linen cloths. When did we first hear about linen cloth? Back on Christmas Eve, when Mary gave birth to a son

and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. Luke does not want us to miss the stunning continuity between the joyful miracle of Christmas and the ecstatic hope of resurrection.

Samuel Wells, Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London, recounts a conversation he had once just before Easter. He writes: A while ago a friend said to me, “It must be tough being a vicar at Easter.” Wells said, “Why? It’s the most inspiring time of the whole year. There’s forgiveness and eternal life, and if you want something softer, there’s bunnies and chocolate eggs. What’s not to like?” “Yeah,” his friend retorted, “You preachers think that. But the truth is, everyone else still prefers Christmas.”

Sam Wells says that conversation set him thinking. Christmas and Easter do offer two different views of coming to faith in Christ. There’s the Christmas view, the straight out of the wrapping paper, no smudge marks, untarnished perfection. When the Christmas stars are aligned; when kings come to bow before a higher power; and the poorest of the poor shepherds are summoned by choirs of angels to see the baby, it’s not hard to believe in the life-giving goodness of God at Christmas.

Then there’s the Easter view, the rescued-from-the-scrapheap, saved from the abyss reality.² In the gospel, as in our lives, the developing narrative will introduce problems and conflicts, tensions and disappointments.

² Sam Wells, *The Moment of Truth: Reflections on Incarnation & Resurrection*, p. 97 ff., paraphrased.

Those early Easter pilgrims had just experienced days of ghastly, merciless human cruelty and violence. So have we. We saw last week's Palm Sunday bombings, in both Ukraine and Gaza, snuff out more precious lives, even children. Since then, two more school shootings – at a high school and a college. We've watched innocent people carried off as criminals and falsely imprisoned, heard conspiracy theories morph into false truths with an uptick in disease, joblessness and chaos. While the stock markets take a roller coaster ride, we see people with wealth destabilizing those with little wealth.

The whole world seems just now to be tilting on its axis with increasing fearmongering, uncertainty, and a dangerous realignment of power. When we look around and mostly see a Good Friday world of suffering, pain, denial, betrayal and death -- it may indeed be harder to believe in Easter.

But remember how Luke located Jesus back in the gospel's first chapters: In the reign of Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, during the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Every cruel political character and corrupt religious leader who had Jesus killed in the end, was introduced to us at the beginning. The very same world into which Jesus was born, where he carried out his ministry, and for which he died. Our world.

Today the gospel makes sure we remember that after a lifetime of confronting the powers of this world,

of meeting disease with a healing touch; of challenging political violence and oppression with a liberating word, of facing hatred with love, those bands of cloth once wrapped around a baby are now neatly folded inside an empty tomb. God's beautiful incarnation is now an unstoppable resurrection power unleashed in all the world, and therefore Luke will not leave us circled up around an idle tale in a state of confusion and disorientation.

Far beyond that first utterance, "He is not here, but has risen, the Acts of the Apostles records how the resurrection took hold of the disciples, and empowered them to be like Jesus. C. S. Lewis said, "I believe in Christianity, as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." That's exactly what happens in Acts, Luke tells us how the resurrection empowered the disciples to be the Body of Christ, the church in the world. Just as Jesus once called them to follow him, those disciples began to call others to follow the Risen Christ; just as Jesus had healed, they began to perform miracles of healing; they themselves began to practice what Jesus had taught them; they shared their goods in common, they gathered in love and worked for justice resisting the oppressive powers of their world. They gave everything they could to the poor, to any who had need.

New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, has said: "If it is really true that - in going to his death Jesus took upon himself, the full weight of the world's evil - then clearly there is a task waiting to be done." I love the way Wright goes on to explain what he means: "The music Jesus wrote must

be performed. The early disciples saw this and got on with it. When Jesus emerged from the tomb – justice, spirituality, relationship and beauty rose with him. The world is a different place, a place where heaven and earth have been joined forever. God’s future has arrived in the present... hence a new creation.”³

Friends, it may look – far too often like a Good Friday world. But that is not the world in which we live. By the power of the resurrection we ourselves have been raised to perform the music Jesus wrote, and to get on with it. Luke has shown us that from Jesus’ birth to his death and, in Acts, by the light of his resurrection we can see everything good that God can do. Far beyond that first proclamation of resurrection, once dismissed as an idle tale, we, we ourselves, are empowered to join the Living Christ in God’s good work in the world. As that old Southern preacher and Civil Rights worker, Clarence Jordan, said about Easter: “The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that Jesus lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship, not a rolled-away stone, but a carried away church.” Let’s be that carried away church, following the Living Christ and joining in God’s good work in the world. That’s all the proof of resurrection we need.

AMEN.

³ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*.