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April 21, 2019 Easter

Acts 10:34-43

Luke 24:1-12

### UN-IDLING THE TALE

“But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” That’s the first reaction to the very first proclamation about the resurrection of our Lord – it seemed to them an idle tale. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, another woman named Mary and some other women shared joyful resurrection news on that first Easter morning, but they were not believed.

What do you think the disciples were talking about before the women showed up with their resurrection news? Perhaps they were in a bit of a daze because of all that had taken place recently. There’s a chance they were discussing organizing a memorial service, wondering whether it would be safe to hold it at Jesus’ tomb. Then, surprisingly, the women rush in, telling them about what they had found. But to them, it seemed unfounded. The women had told them of the empty tomb, but they thought it had to be an empty tale.

We who live in the northern hemisphere see the beauty of springtime about the same time as Easter each year. Last weekend, Nancy and I went down to see the cherry blossoms in Fairmount Park. It is a joy to have the vibrant floral combination of colors outside and here in this sanctuary. And yet, the resurrection is much more than plants coming out of a state of dormancy. When we humans die, we die. We don’t blossom anew the next spring. So, the idea of resurrection does not make rational sense from a human perspective. As a result, resurrection news doesn’t fit our normal mindset, and it still can get treated as an idle tale.

Some who hear the story of Jesus’ resurrection say that it’s just imagery for his teachings being considered immortal, like the plays of Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven, a metaphorical way to say that Jesus’ wisdom and truth will live on forever. Or there are some who might think the story of the resurrection is a way to express the sense of Christ’s living presence in the loving community of his

believers. <sup>1</sup> Those can be extraordinary things, but the resurrection we celebrate is more than that.

I hadn't really noticed how Luke's Gospel reminds us about the unnaturalness of the resurrection story until a device of its storytelling was pointed out to me some time ago. Six times in just twelve verses, Luke's account is peppered with the defiant conjunction 'but.' It's almost as if Luke grabs us by the arm and moves us to a place that no matter what we've heard or experienced, that there's another aspect to the resurrection story that defines the world in which we live and die.

Prior to the Easter account, Luke had described the crucifixion, and upon Jesus' death, there is the added detail about the women who had witnessed it being filled with mourning. The entombment process for Jesus' body is detailed, and Luke makes it clear that the women saw where the body was laid. These same women then prepared spices and ointments to anoint and honor Jesus' body. They simply wanted to carry out a simple ritual of death, but they couldn't even do that. For, as the sun went down on that Friday evening, the Sabbath was beginning, and according to Jewish law, they could not carry out their respectful task. It is the lowest of low points of any story. Then Luke starts the resurrection account with: "But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared."

Luke clearly knows there is another very strong storyteller loose in the world, who convinces so many that death ends life in hopeless finality and futility. I hear evidence myself of that other storyteller, who weaves a persuasive tale describing our world to be defined by cynicism and scorn. That storyteller seems eager to subvert resurrection faith with premature certainties about the way things are and always will be, leading many to categorize everything else as an idle tale.

However, Luke tells things differently, saying that when the women arrive at Jesus' tomb, they do not find the stone still covering its entrance. They step into the tomb, but do not find Jesus' body there. Suddenly two who are described as angels appear to them. In fear, the women bow to the ground, but the angels pronounce resurrection news, first in question form: "Why do you look for the living among

the dead?” followed by, “He is not here, but has risen.” They then encourage the women to remember what Jesus had repeatedly told them, that he would be betrayed, killed, and would rise again. Upon remembering, they leave the tomb to go tell Jesus’ other followers. These women, in essence, preach the very first Christian sermon, and Luke describes the response this way: “But their words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.”

Other translations use a variety of phrases other than “an idle tale” - “empty talk,” “a silly story,” “a foolish yarn,” “utter nonsense.” Sexist views about women serving as witnesses may have had something to do with such a reaction, but it seems that primarily those followers had allowed that other storyteller to dominate their hearts and minds. Their doubt of or even disdain for the women’s version of the story was somewhat understandable. Resurrection was not the natural order of things. Through the tragedy played out in the previous few days, they found their hope was dead, their dreams were dead, their future was dead, because Jesus was dead. That was an extremely painful loss, and they were in no way inclined to embrace the vulnerability of new hope so soon. The non-Easter storyteller told them that violence and death were the strongest powers, and nothing could change that, so they might as well accept it. When people died, they stayed dead. Then the women come in breathlessly asserting some unprecedented, unexpected, unexplainable experience – well, that couldn’t be received as anything other than an idle tale. There were too many reasons not to believe their version of the story.

When we are honest with ourselves, we need to admit that there are ways and there are reasons we also treat the resurrection story as an idle tale. We may say we believe Jesus rose from the dead, but perhaps he was the only one impacted by this miracle of new life. It is a lot easier to point to and lament suffering in the world than it is to go out onto a limb proclaiming godly hope, and organize some kind of caring response to that suffering. We see the problems of war and poverty and hatred and misplaced priorities and follow the non-Easter storyteller’s plotline that nothing redemptive can be done about such things. We give in to despair. We allow fear to shape our lives more than love. We are reticent to step out with bold faith. We say and we sing, “Alleluia,” but we keep our religion compartmentalized into one small part of our calendar, and of our lives.

One more time, Luke says, ‘but.’ “But Peter got up and ran to the tomb.” He at least entertained the possibility that the storytellers who had been to the tomb had told him something worth exploring himself. So, he went. Actually, Luke says he ran. I wonder if he started out walking, but then began to ask himself, “What if the women’s version of the story is the true one?” And he begins to pick up his pace and his heart begins to pump a little harder. As he feels his heart pounding, he begins to dare to hope that the women weren’t out of their minds. And suddenly, he is running as fast as his feet will take him. When he arrives at the tomb, he sees the stone rolled back, even as the women had said. Then he stoops and looks in, and sees the linen cloths in which Jesus’ body had been wrapped. And he is amazed. At least, that much of the women’s story was true. In coming days, he would discover the mega-story of the world as being so different from what he had known. Death would no longer define life, but rather life could now define death. Before, he had to be miserly with his hopes, but now he could be extravagant with them. He did not follow a dead hero, but a living Lord. It must have seemed quite unnatural to him and to the others who eventually encountered the resurrected Lord, but it was, it is true.

The gospel, as Karl Barth once put it, “is not a natural therefore, but a miraculous nevertheless.”<sup>2</sup> We need to use that defiant conjunction when we find our minds or our lifestyles conforming to what simply seems as natural as the non-resurrection storyteller’s lines. There are four words that enable us to side instead with the gospel storytellers – those words are: But Jesus is risen! Say that with me: But Jesus is risen! Things look like they have always been, but Jesus is risen, and we see transformation. We reach what we think is the tragic end of the story, but Jesus is risen, which opens the way to amazing new beginnings. There appears to be no way to move forward, but Jesus is risen, and God makes a way out of no way. The ways of death and despair seem to be most powerful – but Jesus is risen, and life and peace and hope blossom.

Let’s dare to explore, to look for ourselves concerning what others think may be just an idle tale and we, like the women and Peter and eventually so many others, may just be amazed at what we find. Let’s listen to and allow ourselves to be shaped by the resurrection storytellers, and we’ll discover a Lord who brings

everlasting hope, life, love, joy and meaning to our hearts and to our world. We, as part of humanity, do so much to discount the amazing story of God's life-giving power, but Jesus is risen! With a resurrection story that redefines us and our world, we can choose for it no longer to be just an idle tale. Alleluia!

<sup>1</sup> Ideas about various interpretations of the resurrection from Frederick Buechner, The Alphabet of Grace, HarperOne, 2009 (reprint edition).

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in an article by Ted Wardlaw found at: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2007-03/unnatural-event>