



Easter Sunday

AN IDLE TALE

LUKE 24:1-12

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The Easter morning story is a tale of striking, powerful contrasts: dark and light, confusion and clarity, death and life, silence and sound.

Imagine that room where the disciples waited together that morning, doors locked again against danger, having seen the women off on their dawn journey to the tomb to complete their solemn task. They must have imagined that their story was at its end; anything further could only be a sad epilogue to the most exciting, invigorating and devastating three years of their lives.

Dark, with the windows shuttered and doors closed; confusion, without any sense of what to do now; death and grief troubling their shared heart; silence, as they waited and watched for the women to return.

And then suddenly, there's pounding footsteps up the stairs, and familiar voices chattering outside, and the women are back, banging on the door to be let in.

Sound where there had been silence: it was quite the crowd that burst in on the eleven disciples and their companions. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, the other women. We don't know how many, exactly. But we can imagine them babbling excitedly, talking over top of one another, in an effort to share all that they had experienced. Luke tells us that they told the disciples everything.

I wonder what all did the women tell them? Did they talk about how frightened and worried they were, when they got there and saw the stone already rolled back from the tomb? Did they describe the sinking feeling in their hearts when the body of their dear friend and teacher was not there? Did they describe the strange people they met, terrifying in their dazzling clothes, lighting up the dark tomb, and the words these shining men shared with them?

Despair giving way to hope, dark driven out by light...can we blame the disciples for thinking that the women were telling an idle tale? It is unbelievable; ridiculous. An opened tomb, shining men, Jesus' body gone.

I wonder if the disciples tried to calm them down, thinking that grief and some kind of scare in the gloom of dawn had overwhelmed them. I wonder if the disciples got angry, because they were afraid to believe. Fear often makes us act out with anger, to cover it up. Peter went and had a look; I wonder if that was a compromise; a way to end the women's idle tale-telling and the men's rejection of it. Peter saw some hard, concrete evidence that the tomb was empty and, oddly, the burial clothes were still there; odd, because someone transporting a body three days' dead would be more likely to leave it wrapped up.

Inconclusive, but curious; Peter is amazed, in the old-fashioned sense of the word: greatly surprised and filled with wonder. But the absence of a body is not evidence of resurrection, it seems; the disciples will be amazed once more to see Jesus stand before them, on Easter eve.

Confusion seems to gradually give way to amazement, to new clarity and wonder in this Easter morning tale. When we began reading Luke's account, it almost seemed like it's an anonymous group headed to the tomb at dawn - we don't find out the women's names until halfway through the story. Along with keeping them anonymous until they deliver their message to the grieving disciples, the women are perplexed - utterly confused - by the rolled away stone and the empty tomb. Their confusion is only deepened and overcast by terror because of the two dazzling strangers - angels, we know - who appeared to speak to them.

The angels begin the work of transforming confusion into clarity. They lead the women through the "remembering" necessary to make enough sense of the mystery. Notice how it isn't the mechanics or the science behind the resurrection that matters: it is the words of Christ: "Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" the angels say to the confused women. Hearing anew each of the three promises Christ made about what was to happen to him, the women's foggy confusion about the empty tomb clears as they remember.

Indeed, remembering Jesus' words, seeing how the first two scenarios came to pass, and how the third now seems to have as well, the women remember not only the words but the person that was their rabbi, their teacher, whom they loved and trusted for the truth. They remember Jesus and trust that the divine message is true—they don't even ask how it can be true; they know the source, and the source is worthy of trust.

It reminds me of the story in John 4 of the Samaritan woman at the well; the one Jesus spoke to about living water and worship and her own painful past. She didn't ask Jesus how he could know all that he knew about her, but her instinctual response was to go and tell the good news to her community: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

The women at the empty tomb do likewise. Remembering the powerful words of Jesus, they don't ask questions but return to the rest of Jesus' closest companions to tell them this new good news.

Easter is not a day for silence, for evidence-gathering or skepticism, or even for questions. There are other days for those things, but not today. This is the most important day of the year, celebrating the most powerful, impactful thing that has ever happened in all of creation's history. We are here to proclaim that, just as Jesus told us he would, "Christ the Lord is risen today."

But we also should not be surprised when people continue in the footsteps of the disciples, receiving that message as "an idle tale."

We live in an age of idle tales, filled with many questions; an age where opinions and anxieties and hopes are given the weight of fact. What are we to believe? What is the truth and what is a wild conspiracy theory? Who are we to believe? I suspect many think that the Easter message is just one more anxious hope that is, "a tale ... full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

Can we even explain among ourselves what Easter means? We know it's important, but can we spell out exactly why it matters so much, why Easter is truth, not opinion or speculation or an idle tale? An empty tomb? What did that mean? Men in dazzling white: who were they?

Early in the morning, carrying spices, the women were there to do the final preparations of their teacher's, their friend's, body; a last act of serving love for someone who had meant so much to their little community of disciples and believers. This confusion and hope, light and the possibility of life, was not what they expected to discover at the end of their sad journey.

It seems to me that the entire story of God's relationship with us, God's people, is a story of the unexpected. And that makes the empty tomb, the angels, the resurrection, totally impossible, yes, but also completely in-character: absolutely the kind of unexpected, crazy thing that God would do.

The way to build faith, to build belief and trust in this new unexpected Easter thing that God has done is laid out for us by those dazzling angels, right there in the women's idle tale: Think back, not just to what Jesus told them, but on all the things that God has done.

From the beginning, God's been challenging us to see him at work in the unexpected, the bewildering, the impossible. God is always doing a new thing. Out of a formless void comes light, water, dry land. From the clay on a riverbank, God forms creatures in his own image. An impossible baby is the first in a new nation of God's people, as numerous as the stars in the sky; people walk through the sea on dry ground. Empires rise and fall at impossibly perfect times to give back hope and home to a small, exiled nation; the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us; Christ the Lord is risen today, just as he said he would do.

God continues to do the unexpected, even the impossible, every day; but like the disciples, we ignore or dismiss or fail to see. We look the other way, or we prefer the plausible explanation; we don't want to get caught telling an idle tale.

But Easter is not the time to sit and argue it out, or poke around gathering evidence. Easter is the time to proclaim that God has done the most impossible thing of all: gave life where there was death, beginning the great about-face of all creation away from the Good Friday world of suffering and grief and death and toward the Easter world of peace, hope and life, the way things ought to be.

We do need a little Easter courage to proclaim this news, though. We can find that courage first with Jesus himself.

Throughout his life, right up to the Cross, he continued to teach and proclaim this good news despite the thick-headedness of his listeners. Not the Jewish leaders, who wouldn't even believe after Easter. I mean his disciples, Jesus' followers and friends.

Peter refused to listen when Jesus told his friends exactly what would happen during what we call Holy Week. Over and over, Jesus watched them get confused, let their inability to understand fully stop them from believing or acting as Jesus taught. Over and over, Jesus saw them fail to grasp the meaning of what they saw happening right before their eyes: water turned to wine, the sick healed, the disabled restored to their full abilities, bread and fish multiplied to feed thousands, walking on water and stilling a storm...and yet, they were not prepared on Easter morning to hear the good news the women brought as anything but an idle tale.

Their stubborn blindness didn't stop Jesus; and their dismissal of the women as tale-tellers, well, that didn't stop those women for a moment. And they are our second example of Easter courage.

Those women burst into that locked room telling everything to their friends. They didn't care about the looks on the faces of their listeners. They didn't wait for everyone to join them in a chorus of "Jesus Christ is Risen Today"! These women had amazing news they had to share, even if those in the room thought it was an idle tale. And we can't let the disbelief of others stop us from proclaiming our own good news, too.

We need to turn away from what is not there, and focus on what is: life, and not death. As the dazzling angel messengers asked the women, "why do you look for the living among the dead?" He isn't there; he is risen. Jesus has burst into the middle of history with this resurrection of his, rewritten reality, and yet we continue to focus on the empty tomb, the details that don't add up, the disbelief and dismissal of others: we look for Jesus among the dead.

The tale of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection can seem like an idle tale. It is the story of a king born in a stable, of miracles and mystery, of a kingdom where all will be made right; of an innocent man, arrested and executed, and a tomb that is empty. Astounding, from beginning to end: and Christ is not there, because he is risen.

God's ways are not our ways. God is always doing a new thing, every day. And we who have met the risen Christ are called to join the women telling "all of this" on Easter Sunday, and every other day, too: everything we know about Jesus, everything he is and everything he has done and is doing and will do.

Light instead of dark; clarity out of confusion, life and no more death, joyous, dazzling sound in place of mournful silence. May we be as bold and brave as the women were that first Easter morning, and keep telling everyone all that we have seen. Thanks be to God. Amen.