

Sermon on Luke 24:1-12
Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

“An Idle Tale/B.S./Garbage or Good News?”

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

The Easter gospel begins today with the extraordinary experience of three women at Jesus’ tomb – in the early morning, at dawn, when it was still dark, on the first day of the week. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and a woman named Joanna. They noticed strange things – no Roman guards to be found (strange!) – and the great stone was rolled away – the tomb was empty – what’s going on? They were perplexed, Luke writes – dumbfounded. But suddenly two men in dazzling clothes appeared, and the women were terrified (like the shepherds, in the hills above Bethlehem, when the angels appeared at Jesus’ birth)

“Why do you seek the living among the dead?” they said. “He is not here, but has risen...But remember how he told you what would happen, that he would be handed over and crucified, but on the third day rise again.” And then they remembered what Jesus had said, and so they hurried back to tell the other eleven disciples, and all the rest who were gathered in hiding.

But who would believe such a tale? When the women reported back to the disciples what they had seen and heard at Jesus empty tomb, that Easter morning, the disciples dismissed it, calling it an “idle tale”. (That’s the cleaned up version.) It’s either a sexist dismissive put down of the women as bringing an emotional bit of gossip – or worse, they called it b.s. – baloney - just a load of garbage – dare I say crap?) They didn’t listen - because they didn’t believe them (typical men?!).

But it’s interesting about Peter – though he didn’t stand up for the women, he did get up and go to see for himself if there was anything to this. He went to check it out, to try to verify what he couldn’t believe (it was too fantastic), yet hoped were true. Could it be true? So he ran to the tomb, and looked inside, to find it empty as well, except for Jesus’ grave clothes, neatly folded (Jesus had even made his bed!). Peter went home amazed. He still hadn’t seen the risen Christ in the flesh, but all the evidence and witnesses pointed to that. Later on, in the other gospels, we hear the story of Peter’s encounter with the risen Lord – but not in Luke. For Luke’s story is about the women, how their witness wasn’t believed at first by the men, but most of all, how the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the dead surprised them all, caught them off guard, terrified and amazed them all! Remember, no one has seen Jesus yet!

So this story seems to summarize what can run through most of our minds when we humans hear the story of Easter. You can either dismiss it (and belittle

anyone who would believe it), you can take it at face value (lucky for you if you have a simple, child-like faith that will accept the story as it is told), or you go looking for evidence yourself, to see if it “might” be true (because wouldn’t it be great if it were!). Dismiss it, believe it, or check it out. (Trust – but verify!) What else is there to do? Most of us don’t take the story at face value any more – those days are long gone. Some of the faithful few are like the women, who rose up early in the morning to seek out Jesus for themselves, and serve their Lord lovingly.

But it seems to me that we in the Church today are mostly like Peter in the story. Some days we might be like the other disciples, and dismiss the women’s story of what they saw, out of hand. It’s too unbelievable, too contrary to our experience in this world. Human beings just don’t rise from the dead, no matter how much we want them to be, how much we pray or bargain with God. When people die, they stay dead. That’s all that we know for sure. But what the three women told the disciples that morning intrigued Peter, even though he was too afraid to say so. He went to check it out, to see if there was something to what they said. And he saw that there was, just as they had said. Today we hear a lot of people – a majority of people – scoff at the likelihood of Easter being true, or a Son of God being raised from the dead. How can we refute them? We are not eye witnesses – no one is! But this Easter morning it is like you and I and everyone here is like Peter, getting up out of bed and coming to the church to hear that same story, that gives us hope. Actually, every Sunday morning that you come to worship, any time you and I gather with others to hear the gospel read, we are like Peter going to the tomb to check it out, to see if Jesus’s body is there, or if he has risen. And on Easter morning, Peter RAN to the tomb, hoping against hope that the women had told the truth! So you and I got up a bit earlier this morning, dressed up a little finer perhaps, made sure everyone in the family is ready to go, and perhaps have come with a little more “bounce” in your step, because it is Easter morning, and you are coming to check out a really important truth in your life – that there is life, even after we die, just as Jesus promised. But we must also recognize that some of you may identify with the women in the story – who weren’t believed, even when they told the truth. That may be next year’s sermon!

So how do YOU respond to the story? You must admit, it is exhilarating and fun to come to worship in Christian churches on Easter Sunday and have everyone sing and celebrate as if it were easy for all of us to believe it, and be united in the witness to the world that Jesus Christ, once crucified, has risen from the dead! (He is risen indeed!) Today we sing great hymns of faith, hear the story again and shout alleluias, almost like this were the NCAA championships and we are all behind the same team in March Madness, that our team won and we won the office pool! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

But it's never that easy, is it?! We don't easily accept from others what seems "too much" to believe and beyond our normal human experience. Some folks can't even imagine that there is a God, much less a risen Lord. Like, a human being rising from the dead – yeah, right, just show me! But in the gospel stories of the resurrection we hear the women witness what they saw and heard – that the tomb was empty, and angels appeared, saying that Jesus had risen from the dead! And in John's version of the gospel, Mary Magdalene said that she had "seen the Lord", alive and well, in the garden, saying her name (which is how she recognized him). Later in John's gospel, a skeptical disciple named Thomas didn't believe until he saw the scars on Jesus' hands and in his sign. We'll deal with that story next week!

But I guess faith and life are not about what you and I say we believe today in church, or even what we sing in worship, or think we believe about Jesus. It's about what you and I do with this story tomorrow, and what we do with our faith out there in the world for the rest of the week, and the rest of our lives. What do we do as the Church, as a congregation, to witness to our Lord who lives, in and through our lives, our words, and our actions in his name! That's the real test of faith! If we believe it, surely we will love one another, and love our neighbors as ourselves, just as Christ commands us.

Because the meaning and the purpose of the Easter story is in how it can and should change our whole perspective – for the Resurrection of our Lord has changed everything! By raising Jesus from the dead, God has won a great victory over sin and death! Not that living creatures and human beings no longer die – we all still do – but God has taken away the finality of death, making it a temporary condition before an eternity of living - death is no longer the permanent state of affairs. Because of what God has done through Christ, the biblical "curse of Adam" has been lifted - that although we shall indeed die, we now shall also live, and be raised, as Jesus was!

Having LIFE to look forward to in our future, even after death, does indeed change everything. Having hope makes us look at life differently each day, just as living without hope drastically changes how we view it. Because of Easter, we can always be described as people of hope – forever hopeful, no matter how discouraging and hard life gets. Our liturgy of baptism describes this well:

God, who is rich in mercy and love, gives us a new birth into a living hope through the sacrament of baptism. By water and the Word, God delivers us from sin and death and raises us to new life in Jesus Christ. We are united with all the baptized in the one body of Christ, anointed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and joined in God's mission for the life of the world.

There are great Easter hymns which use the image of "being in prison" for our bondage to sin and death. We can't get away from sin – for it's in our nature – which leads us all to the reality of death. But we sing of this great victory on Easter, in

which Jesus has broken through death's dark prison, and sets you and me free as well!

Last night at our Easter Vigil, after dark, we gathered to celebrate the first eucharist of Easter. We sang this great Easter hymn together:

*Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands for our offenses given;
But now at God's right hand he stands and brings us life from heaven.
Therefore let us joyful be and sing to God right thankfully,
Loud songs of hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.*