

Sermon “A Perplexing, Terrifying, Amazing, Idle Tale”

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SCRIPTURE Luke 24: 1-12

The Resurrection of Jesus

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The 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. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 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.

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In our Easter Sunday gospel reading from Luke this morning. No one sees Jesus.

This is not the reading where Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb, saw that Jesus’ body was not inside, and ran to get Peter and John. When they arrived at the tomb, they looked around and saw the same thing she had. And they went home. But after the disciples went home, Mary saw someone she thought was the gardener. She asked him where they had taken Jesus’ body. And the gardener called Mary’s name and she recognized him as Jesus. In John’s gospel, Mary saw the risen Lord.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples on the way to Emmaus later that same day. And those disciples walking on that road spoke of being astounded by the story of the women in today's reading. But that's next week's scripture.

The women in this morning's reading did not see Jesus.

The women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women with them, had gone to the tomb to wash Jesus' body with the appropriate spices and ointments. They had been present at the cross and had seen the tomb where Jesus was laid. But they were unable to perform the ritual cleansing and anointing of their faith as it was the evening of the Sabbath. So they had gone home to wait until after the Sabbath.

These women were truly his disciples. They had supported Jesus and the disciples financially during Jesus' ministry. These women and others had "provided for them out of their resources." (Luke 8:2-3) Devoted to Jesus, these women had been present at the cross and at the grave. They had stayed with Jesus when others deserted him. And now they have returned to the tomb after observing the Sabbath. They were going to make sure Jesus' body received the proper attention, care and respect.

But Jesus' body was nowhere to be found. The stone blocking the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away. And the tomb was empty. Luke tells us they were perplexed. I imagine it was quite unsettling, not a good feeling at all. After all they had been through two days earlier, after bearing witness to Jesus' death and burial, his body was gone.

And then two angels appeared. I know, Luke calls them "men in in dazzling clothes." But they certainly sound like angels, so I will call them that. Anyway, they appeared out of nowhere. Luke said the women were terrified. In their perplexed state, in their unsettled state, in the presence of two strangers, I can understand why these women were terrified.

Yet, I don't think these women frightened easily. After all, they had supported this radical rabbi financially. They had been followers of this radical rabbi during his life as he upset the establishment. They had looked upon the cross. They were present when he was laid in the tomb. These were courageous disciples.

Then the two men in dazzling clothes asked the women a perplexing question. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Why wouldn’t they look for Jesus among the dead, in the tomb? That’s where they last saw him. That’s what they knew. That’s what people do.

We go back to what we know. When things in our lives are changing, when life has thrown us the unexpected, we often respond in ways that are familiar. But we can’t always go back to the way things were before. It can be perplexing, not knowing what to do. It can be terrifying, if we are talking about significant life changes.

Growing up, my brothers and I always had a snack at bedtime. When we had a bad day, mom would make brownies or some such treat. As a grown adult, whose metabolism is not what it was as a child, those are not such great coping skills. But that doesn’t mean I do not turn to them in difficult times. Now I realize that this is not something that is terrifying by any stretch of the imagination. But it can be challenging.

Consider the woman who has been in an abusive relationship, who has moved into a shelter for battered women and their children. The move can bring safety and security, but it also brings confusion. And starting an unknown future can be terrifying. And if that woman enters into a relationship in the future, she needs to be on guard to not become involved with someone that might mistreat her – not to return to old pattern of relationship.

The pandemic has changed much. It was confusing to start. We did not know what to do. Being in public could be frightening, especially for people at high risk of infection. It was confusing and for some people it was terrifying. So people turned to Peapod or Amazon for groceries when they tried to be socially distant. Some people started working from home, relying on their computers more. Even churches turned to Zoom for services, meetings, or programs. And now, busy people continue to have groceries delivered because they are in the habit. Some businesses are allowing employees to work from home some days and work virtually others. And churches continue to use Zoom. Life has changed. But the process was not easy. We will not return to the old ways.

The women were perplexed and terrified. Their lives had changed with Jesus’ death. They would not return to the old way of being with him. But the angels

told them, “ ‘He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ ”

Luke tells us that the women, “remembered.” They Re- membered. They recalled Jesus words. And they thought about what he had said. They started putting the puzzle pieces together – the empty tomb and Jesus’ words. They remembered that Jesus would die and rise again. The puzzle was coming together.

Now I don’t know that they fully understood yet. Don’t forget, they still have not seen Jesus. But they felt compelled to share what they had witnessed. They had to share that the tomb was empty tomb. They had to share the message from the men in dazzling clothing. So they ran back to tell their story to the apostles and others.

And those apostle and the others who were with them, they heard the women’s story and did not believe it. Luke tells us that those men thought it was an “idle tale.” Some commentators say that “idle tale” is not strong enough language, that an appropriate translation would have been “garbage.” The words of these women, devoted women who had not deserted Jesus, who had been at the tomb on Friday, and who had returned to show respect for Jesus’ body, were not taken seriously.

So Peter went to check in out. He found the tomb as the women had described it - empty. And the linen cloths were by themselves. Luke tells us, Peter was “amazed at what had happened.”

The women had been perplexed and terrified but then remembered. Peter was amazed. As yet, they had not seen Jesus. As yet, it’s hard to say that they understood. They could not know how their lives would change.

This morning, we celebrate Easter. We have faith in the Resurrection of our Lord. We have not seen Jesus in person. We have not seen the risen Christ. But we believe that he is alive. Now, let’s remember, that the risen Christ was not exactly the same as the Jesus who died on the cross. The risen Christ was not recognized by his disciples on the road to Emmaus. The risen Christ later appeared to his disciples, entering a locked upper room. The risen Christ was somehow different.

So we may not fully understand what resurrection means or what resurrection looks like. His disciples did not then and we may not now. But we profess that the risen Christ is within us and we are called to be his hands and feet and bring his light and his love to others. And we profess that we are called to see him in others.

Some people still consider all of that an idle tale.

But it is the faith that we try to live. And when we try to live in that “idle tale,” in that Easter mystery, sometimes it can be perplexing, sometimes it can be terrifying, sometimes it can be amazing. As we go forth, living as Easter people, let us spread the message that Christ is alive with our words and with our lives. Christ is risen. Alleluia! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!