

(Luke 24:1-12 NRSV)

On the Sabbath day they rested according to the commandment. <sup>1</sup> But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup> but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup> While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup> that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." <sup>8</sup> Then they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup> and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup> Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup> 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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## An Idle Tale

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Text: Luke 24:1-12.

This is Easter morning. This morning is the highpoint, the pinnacle, the zenith of the Christian story. Paul says that if Jesus was not raised from the dead, then our faith is futile (1 Cor. 15:17). Easter, resurrection, it is the hinge on which swings whatever truth Christianity has.

But Easter morning is a disturbing story, too. At least it is disturbing the way it is told in the Bible. I have looked at all four Biblical renditions, and the story lacks certainty in every case. There is no recorded eye witness to Jesus' resurrection. In Mark when Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Salome arrive, the stone is rolled away and Jesus is gone. In Matthew an angel meets the women and rolls the stone away and tells them that Jesus has been raised, but again no one sees it. In John Mary Magdalene reports to the disciples that Jesus has been taken away and she does not know where they have laid him. And in the passage from Luke we heard this morning, it says, "When they went in they did not find the body."

Here we have the most important event of the Christian story, and there is not one, not even one corroborating witness to its occurrence!

And it gets more troubling, yet. In every case, even though those who came to the tomb and found Jesus missing were told that he had been raised, in every case they either ignored what they heard, disbelieved it or ran away in fear. In Luke's retelling of the story the women tell the disciples that two men in dazzling clothes have told them that Jesus has risen, and the disciples took it as an idle tale. The Greek is actually even more crude. The disciples thought the story to be nonsense. In fact the word used is a medical term meaning the wild talk of the delirious. Jesus' disciples found the story of his resurrection to be delirious.

One might have thought that Jesus would have called the best and the brightest to be his disciples. One might have thought that they would have stayed around and watched for it. One might have thought that those whom he had told time and again what would happen might have believed it when it came to pass. One might have thought that finally, after missing so much of what he had said to them throughout their earthly time together, that On Easter morning at least

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Jesus' closest followers might have understood what was going on. And yet the Bible tells us that they did not.

So, what's the lesson here? Is it that the disciples were thick and confused and slow to believe, but we should not be? Are the stories of the resurrection in the Bible meant to help us believe what the disciples failed to? Are the stories of the disbelieving disciples meant to give a sympathetic nod to our own doubts, but then coax us to better than they, to believe where they did not?

Well, that is certainly a possibility. Surely each of us has struggled with our beliefs. Surely we have wondered what we might have believed if we faced the empty tomb had we been there with the women on Easter morning, or what we might have believed if the women had come to us telling what they heard from angels. And surely all of us have struggled in those dark nights of our own souls when the promise of the resurrection or even the idea of God has seemed an idle tale. Surely something to coax our confidence, something to coax our faith is a good idea. So, it may not be too far-fetched to think that the Easter morning stories are meant to strengthen our faith by assuring us that others before us have doubted.

But in the end, can that really be the point? More and more I doubt it is. More and more I am certain that Easter morning is but a prelude. The first events of Easter morning continue the downward slide in the story of Jesus. The previous week had been nearly a free-fall to the bottom. Jerusalem drew its net ever tighter around him. Accusations flew. Tempers flared. Patience thinned. The mob grew. The disciples fled. And the man who healed the sick and taught about love was bound and dragged to his death because his rather simple ideas sent tremors through almost everyone. His ideas sent tremors through almost everyone for they realized that those rather simple ideas would shake the very foundations of the world in which they lived. And the forces of darkness extinguished the light of the world.

By Easter morning a few of the women had at least pulled themselves together enough to bring spices to the tomb to treat the body. And when they got there, the story only became worse. Now the body was gone. The grave, they thought, had been robbed. Even when they were told that he had been raised, they were fearful, doubtful, even disbelieving.

And maybe the point is that at that moment they should have been fearful, doubtful and disbelieving. Not simply because it was such a fantastic story, but precisely because an empty tomb, or a tomb with angels trumpeting glory is no real evidence of anything good. And I think the idea that Easter and resurrection is all about faith in the face of no real reason to believe it is somewhat overrated.

I want to be careful here, for this is sacred ground on which we are treading. I want to assure you that there is no question in my mind that what the women found on Easter morning was a tomb out of which Jesus had risen. There is no

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question in my mind that Jesus was raised from the dead that morning. But does my saying so convince you? Perhaps, as Fred Buechner says somewhere, it helps to know that your pastor, a reasonably intelligent person, believes these fantastic and wonderful stories. Perhaps. But in the end, does my saying so really convince you? Probably not. And it probably shouldn't. It probably shouldn't any more than the empty tomb and the testimony of the angels convinced the women and the disciples.

When I was growing up, my mother was very insistent that I believe in God. She was scandalized if I said I wasn't sure. She was sure, I think, that God would strike me dead for my disbelief, or even my doubt. My mother gave me more wonderful things in life than I can count. But I am afraid this insistence on belief was not one of them. For from that I learned that believing in God was largely an exercise in believing in something that I had no real reason to believe in, other than my mother's reprimand and the threat of God's retribution which she delivered on God's behalf. I was taught that faith was believing what seemed unbelievable, and that such faith would lead to eternal life in heaven, and the lack of it would lead to the eternal fires. It turns out that if I had read the Bible in those early days, I might have run into the disciples and others of Jesus' followers who couldn't pull it off any better than I did.

At the moment of the discovery of the tomb from which Jesus' body was missing, at that point in the flow of events any speculation or any story about resurrection was simply delirium, an idle tale. And I fear any Easter celebration we do in our time that looks only to the empty tomb and rejoices, "He is risen. He is risen, indeed!" Our faith has to be more than our willingness to look bad news in the face and refuse to accept it, to look bad news in the face and say we do not believe it is true, to simply claim victory in the face of defeat. Thank God, there has to be more to it than that, because if that's what it were all about, I imagine that Easter would leave us empty after the glow of the music and the scent of flowers and the fervor of the proclamations have worn off.

But the story does not stop at the tomb with the cry, "He is risen!" In every case the empty tomb creates only fear, or worry, or additional sorrow, or disbelief for those who see it or hear of it. But, also, in every case, the story continues and belief comes. And when and why does belief come? Belief and faith come in the encounter with the risen Christ.

In Matthew the women meet Jesus on the way back from the tomb, and they fall and worship him. Even then, Jesus' some of disciples do not believe until he appears before them on the mountain in Galilee.

Generally scholars believe that Mark ended at the eighth verse of chapter 16, that it ends with the women leaving the tomb in fear and telling no one. And they didn't tell anyone. For as the young man in the tomb told them, Jesus had gone ahead of them to Galilee. For Mark, writing thirty of forty years after Easter, for

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Mark writing in one of the early flourishing Christian communities, for Mark the point is that Jesus did go ahead of them to Galilee. The women told no one anything about the tomb. But the risen Christ showed up in Galilee, and in response to that encounter, they believed.

Easter morning in John, Mary is weeping outside the tomb because the body has been stolen. The angels' assurances did little to calm her grief. But when the man she mistook for the gardener cried out, "Mary." Her heart leapt and the weight lifted and she answered, "Rabbouni." Later in this same Gospel Thomas said he could not believe until he touches the nail marks in Jesus' hands and the gash in his side. But once Thomas actually sees Jesus before him, he no longer requires anything else; he answers, "My Lord and my God."

And what is perhaps the most familiar story of the risen Christ to us in this congregation is the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, found in this morning's Gospel, Luke. This story, which is the heart of our monthly communion narrative, tells of the two disciples who leave Jerusalem on Easter morning, forlorn and defeated, and on the way they are joined by a man they think to be a stranger. But of course, the stranger is none other than the risen Christ. And when he shares the communion meal with them that evening, their eyes were opened, and they recognize him. Once they had this moment of awakening, they could look back and make sense of the things Jesus had told them. Once they had this encounter with the risen Christ, they could look back on the empty tomb and understand that he was risen.

So the question of Easter morning is not, do you find your faith in the empty tomb? The question of Easter morning is, have you run into the risen Christ yet? And I'm willing to bet that the answer to that question is yes, yes indeed. Oh, maybe you thought he was the gardener, or a stranger on the road, but I am willing to believe that the risen Christ has already appeared to you.

Sometimes we don't recognize the risen Christ, and sometimes his presence is more subtle than we expect. Have you ever been to the valley of the shadow of death? Have you ever walked to the tomb and found even that empty? Have you ever thought that you were at the end of your rope. And then, out of the blue, in subtle and soft but unmistakable tones, you sense hope or well-being or the holy?

Have you ever found tears flowing down your cheeks for no reason at all, or as best you can tell simply because something profound is stirring inside of you? Have you ever looked at God's creation, a sunset, a blossoming tree, a rainbow, or just a spring day and understood, even if but for a fleeting moment, that you are standing on holy ground? Have you ever looked upon a loved one, or even a complete stranger and been overcome with a sense of love that you know comes from more than just your own heart? Have you ever prayed and had the distinct sense that there was someone listening to you and holding you in their arms? Have

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you ever found yourself suddenly and clearly knowing the right thing to do in the midst of a puzzling or even overwhelming situation? Have you ever sensed an inner calm and peace just when you needed it most? Oh God, I could go on and on. But you get the idea. These are encounters with the risen Christ. They are the evidence of the resurrection. They are what relieves the despair of the empty tomb.

And so, like those who have come before us, we have encountered Jesus. Sometimes we have missed him. Sometimes we have mistaken him for the gardener. Sometimes we have barely noticed him. But the most powerful stories of our Christian faith proclaim that we will run into him again and again and again. And through our encounter with him all things will be changed. Even an empty tomb and delirious tales will be made into something new. He is risen, and he is here. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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