

“Not Just an Idle Tale”  
Luke 24:1-12 – March 27, 2016

INTRO: This is one of the four versions of the Easter story which we find in the Bible. In Luke’s gospel, it’s the women who had stood at the foot of the cross, who were those keeping a vigil as his body was placed in the tomb. On their Sabbath day they rested, but then returned the next morning with spices, to anoint his body, to embalm it properly.

A number of years ago, as we began the discussion of how to address our aging parking structure here at the church, I remember hearing the story that at least some people thought there might be underground springs on our property, and to keep that in mind, whatever we did. Well, if there were springs present, we didn’t encounter them, since we filled in the area to the west of the church, rather than going any deeper. But the story still lives. Chick, our maintenance person, tells me that every now and then, an area in the boiler room, under an old empty oil tank, will have standing water in it. The water, when it appears, is always clear and has no odor, and then it just dissipates. So—who knows if maybe this underground springs story is more than just our own urban legend.

Good stories take on a life of their own. One of them, from the Hispanic tradition in the southwest part of our country goes like this: One rainless year the fields of the Pueblo village were drying up, so the Indians went to the priest to ask him for the statue of the Holy Child. They wanted to carry the Holy Child through their fields to see if he could help bring rain. The priest gave them permission, so they went to the church and took the Holy Child out of the arms of the statue of their patron saint, San Antonio. Then they carried him around their fields and pastures. When they returned to their homes rain clouds were already forming. The Indians were very happy to see the storm clouds, but instead of raining, it hailed. They weren’t able to return the Holy Child to the church, so He stayed overnight at the pueblo. Needless to say, the hailstorm ruined their crops, and a group from the pueblo went to tell the priest what had happened. “Father,” they said, “we have come to see our San Antonio.” “What for?” The priest asked. “We want him to go see the mess his son caused yesterday!” (from *Cuentos* by Maestas & Anaya)

These kinds of tales, stories and legends, are still passed from one generation to another. This particular story about Saint Antonio might not mean much to us, either because this isn’t our cultural heritage, or because it’s not our religious tradition. But, to those for whom it is their heritage, it means something, it’s not just nonsense.

When the women returned from the tomb and told the story of an empty tomb and a risen Christ, it seemed an idle tale to those hearing it. The women recounted what they had seen and heard, to the eleven disciples, of course Judas was out of the picture by now, and to “all the rest”—all of those people who had long been Jesus’ followers all the way along. And the people didn’t believe it and thought they were making it all up. Those who heard it as an idle tale, hadn’t been there. They hadn’t seen the empty tomb, they hadn’t heard the angels say that Jesus was risen, they had no experience like the women had.

“An empty tomb in and of itself doesn’t present a persuasive argument for the resurrection; an empty tomb means the body isn’t there. The burden of the Christian proclamation is on the experience of the risen Christ by his followers.” (Fred Craddock)

The story that the women brought back from that tomb sounded like “empty talk,” “a silly story,” “a foolish yarn,” “utter nonsense.” (Thomas Long)

The Greek word for idle talk is *lēros*, a word used by Greek medical writers to describe the babbling of a fevered and insane mind. *Lēros*, or foolish talk, is the root of our word, delirious. Which gives us a clue about how the women’s story was perceived. Peterson’s Message translation says “the apostles didn’t believe a word of it, thought they were making it all up.”

It may have sounded like nonsense to Jesus’ followers and maybe it still sounds like nonsense, to someone outside the Christian tradition, or unless we’ve had an experience that tells us it’s more an *incredible* tale than an idle tale.

If it’s just an idle tale, it’s a story which has little or no effect on us. On the other hand, if it’s not an idle tale, if by faith we own this story as our story, then I believe it is a story which enables us to live, empowered by the one who lives in us—by the risen Christ. For Jesus Christ is not just an example, or a mentor for us, but someone who actively works in our lives.

If you can recall how you first learned to print your letters, you may recall that oftentimes there would be letters made out of dotted lines printed on a page, which you traced over—to give your hand the actual practice of forming the letters in a uniform way. There was a pattern there you could simply follow. But, it might have taken more than just a pattern to get us to make those letters correctly. A teacher or parent might be needed, who would put their hand over ours and guide it, so we got used to the pattern, and “got nearer the ideal. That is what Jesus does. He is not only the pattern and the example. He helps us and guides us and is a living presence.” (William Barclay)

The resurrection of Christ was not an idle tale to one man who was a Christian in Hungary a victim of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. He was imprisoned in a tiny cell, with hardly room to move, and had etched in the plaster with his thumbnail, a picture of Christ. Don't try to tell him that Christ was not alive and his faith futile. He knew differently. (Karen Pidcock-Lester)

Martin Luther once spent three days in a dark depression over something that had gone wrong. On the third day his wife came downstairs dressed in mourning clothes. “Who's dead?” he asked her. “God,” she replied. Luther rebuked her saying, “What do you mean, God is dead? God cannot die.” “Well,” she replied, “the way you've been acting I was sure God had died!”

To choose life rather than death—that is the challenge of Easter. When we lose our health, our relationships, our jobs, our dreams our money, it doesn't mean our lives have to end.

“On the day when I can no longer believe in the Resurrection, I shall no longer be able to follow Christ. It's not that I require a reward after death; it's just that I refuse to have a dead guy running my life.” (Garret Keizer)

If, by faith, this is not an idle tale and we can face up to the reality of death and resurrection, it may have the power to change our living in the here and now, as well as give us hope for the future. There is so much more to life than we ever thought possible—life here on earth, and life beyond. A number of years ago, New York Times columnist Tom Friedman wrote a column which I believe could have been written in 2016. “He said: ‘Imagination is on my mind a lot these days, because it seems to me that the only people with imagination in the world right now are the bad guys.’” Friedman goes on to describe his every morning routine. That he gets up early, turns on his computer, calls up a news page, and then holds his breath to see what horrible events have happened in the world during the night. ‘I so hunger to wake up and be surprised with some really good news—by someone who totally steps out of himself or herself, imagines something different. He finished the article by sharing a dozen or so of his dreams related to world events, international politics, economics, and the presidential election. He dreams of someone stepping up and stepping out, someone imagining a new and better way. The deeper affirmation to make here on this Resurrection Day, is that we hunger for good news and need to be surprised not just by someone stepping out of themselves, but by God breaking into our lives, yet again with the power of resurrection life and hope. That this hope-filled, memory-filled story can once again spark in the lives of God's people. For those of us who have been too many times to the tombs of despair, we need Easter to dawn in our hearts and imaginations.” (David Davis)

“Easter Day is for a people bold enough to believe idle tales and passionate enough to tell the rest of us. A people joyful enough to keep pressing on and wise enough to see the holiness of God in what others deem just so ordinary.” (David Davis)

A man and woman went on vacation to Jerusalem. They had been married for a very long time, and like many marriages, theirs had some rocky spots. While they were there, the wife died. The undertaker told the husband that he could bury her there in the Holy Land, for \$150 or have her shipped home, which would cost \$5000. The man gave it some thought and said he would rather ship her home. The undertaker asked him why he would spend so much money, when many people would think it would be wonderful to be buried in the Holy Land, and that would only cost \$150? To which the man replied, “Well, long ago a man died here in the Holy Land. He was buried here, and three days later he rose from the grave and was alive again. I just can't take that chance.” To be fair to the woman in this story, I think we might be able to tell the same story, but have the husband die! It works either way.

To him though, it was not an idle tale, it was not nonsense. I hope for us, that we can find the Easter story incredible perhaps, but not an idle tale. It is our story—it is our faith story. It is a story that can give us energy and passion and imagination for our living, both today and into whatever God's future may be for us.

--Sue Burwell