

“AN IDLE TALE?”

1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Luke 24:1-12

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Back when I was a teenager, there was a book, very popular in some church circles, all about the evidence to prove the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection. The book was aimed both at skeptics – hoping to persuade – and at believers – to give us arguments with which to convince skeptical friends. I'm sure this book, and others like it are still around. And I don't doubt that they offer an interesting and rewarding exploration into history, Biblical Studies, and philosophical reasoning. But I don't think this has anything to do with Easter.

Easter is not about what you can prove. It's not about ticking a box on a list of “things you have to believe to get into heaven.” It's not about pretending you have no questions or doubts or questions. It's not even about having faith that allows a simple, uncomplicated acceptance of Christian teaching and the Biblical accounts.

Easter is the life-giving power of God in Jesus Christ making a new beginning out of death and despair and hate and sin. Easter is God's declaration that love is stronger than hate, and that death is not the end. Easter is the promise that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God. Easter is the good news that Jesus is alive. Easter is good news for each and every one of us, but not only in an individual sense. Easter gives life to the community of faith, and Easter promises that there's no corner of our world where Jesus can't bring new hope.

Easter doesn't need our proof, our defense, or our certainty to make it real. And all the evidence, arguments, and conviction in the world isn't enough to make the good news of Easter really alive in us. The only thing that can do that is the endless, unconquerable, transformative love of God... if we will let it be real and present to us.

The women came to the tomb that first Easter morning, Luke tells us, and found it empty. They went away with an incredible message from the “men in dazzling clothes” – angels, presumably – but the other disciples, for the most part, dismissed it. Some of the reasons for that were probably foolish prejudice. These guys likely were used to not taking women seriously; maybe they bought into stereotypes that saw women as too emotional, irrational, or gossipy to be trustworthy. But there may have been other reasons, too: Jesus' terrible death had filled his closest friends with fear. It was a traumatic experience, a devastating loss, and the end of so many hopes. We can well imagine that their despair was impenetrable. There was no room in it for a word of hope. So when they heard the women's news, they didn't really listen. They didn't ask questions. They didn't go have a look. They didn't do *anything* with it. It was just words that had no impact on them. An idle tale. So the good news, the joy of Easter, takes a while to find them. It just isn't real to them yet.

I wonder, is the news of Easter real to us? Or is it just an idle tale? Have we let the hope in, or shut it out? Are we ready for Easter yet?

Today hundreds of thousands of people (like us, more or less) are gathering in churches to hear the ancient Easter story. Some are firm and grateful in a sure knowledge that Jesus was raised from the dead. Others can't believe that a dead body could be raised... even though some wish they *could* believe. Most folks, to tell the truth, are somewhere in between ... trying to believe, vacillating between faith and doubt, holding faith in a more spiritual understanding of resurrection, or perhaps willing to contemplate a mystery. Others of course, are just in it for the flowers, the music, and the Easter Egg hunt! ☺

But you know what? In some ways, it doesn't matter. Because Easter's good news, Easter's hope, Easter's joy is for each of us and all of us. However, or why-ever we've gotten here. However slow we may be to recognize the presence of Jesus, and come alive to his love for us - which is not a "fact" of history but a living and enduring reality... for us as much as for Jesus' friends who first heard the news that he was alive.

The four gospels all tell the story in remarkably different ways; there's very little overlap in their accounts - some people find that disturbing. But you know, I think it's really important. Those stories show us people who loved and followed Jesus encountering his risen presence in different ways: John tells us that after initially failing to recognize Jesus (obviously he's different somehow) Mary Magdalene has a very personal conversation with him, though he tells her not to touch him. Thomas doubts the news and not only wants to see for himself, but insists on touching Jesus' wounds. In Matthew's story, the women who visit the tomb and get the news from the angel react with a mixture of fear and joy, and as they're heading home, they run into Jesus, who greets them as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. They kneel down and take hold of his feet and worship him, before going on to tell the others. Mark's gospel just tells us that the women ran away in fear and said nothing to anyone.

The interesting thing about Luke's gospel is that the good news of the resurrection emerges slowly, little by little. The women see the tomb empty and share the news, but only Peter thinks it's worth checking out. He goes and also sees the empty tomb, but no angels, just grave clothes. He's "amazed," Luke tells us. We can't be sure, but it seems like maybe, just maybe, he's beginning to believe.

Luke doesn't mention anybody actually seeing Jesus until evening, when a couple of disciples find themselves walking to Emmaus with a stranger. It's only when they sit down to eat with him, that they recognize Jesus... before he disappears from their sight. When they go to tell the others, they hear that Peter has also seen him (at some unspecified time between the morning and the evening). Then Jesus himself shows up to the whole group... and they are frightened and joyful and wondering all at the same time ... and they have trouble believing that it's really him.

It's all rather confusing, and more messy and less straightforward than the "first Easter" of our imagination. But faith is like that, isn't it? Very few of us follow a rational path to faith, and then

walk confidently onward with no doubts or stumbles or confusion. But Jesus meets us wherever we are, loving us, and offers us his presence as the promise that we will never be without hope.

And we so need hope right now, don't we? These last two years have left us in a place of shocked despair. We've witnessed so much grief and suffering. Losses big and small, personal and shared. Relentless stress and worry. Loneliness. Fractured relationships and broken trust. Anger and hatred and violence and lies. Our world has forever changed, and that's unsettling. And now the tragedy of another war is making us so very afraid. We need the hope of Easter – not an idle tale, not just words, proofs, dogmas, or tests of belief. People in despair or fear need more than that. We need Jesus, who meets us where we are, not with empty promises that everything will be fine, but with love that won't let us go but raises us up into the life God intends for us.

Easter is for us, now, today. Easter is the power to see beyond the troubles and despair of today to a vision of the reign of God which Jesus preached about. Easter is our invitation to follow Jesus into that realm. Easter opens our eyes to the power of God at work in us, in our community of faith, in our neighbors, in our world. Easter is hope we participate in. Easter is hope we bear into the world because we know that Jesus is alive.

One thing we learn from Luke is that the good news of Easter doesn't always make itself known with a lot of fanfare. A couple of men in dazzling clothes, an empty place, a linen shroud, a stranger, bread shared... and gradually the joyful realization comes: Jesus is alive. Christ is risen. *Christ is risen, indeed!*

Easter is standing at a dying loved one's beside and knowing that she belongs to God. Easter is a new perspective and purpose and gratitude for every day that you find after coming through a hard time. Easter is the freedom that comes from being honest, or asking and receiving forgiveness, or letting go of the past. Easter is a congregation singing alleluias in the ashes of their burned-down church. Easter is *this* community where we feel Jesus' presence as we care for one another, rejoice together, and weep together. Easter is our passion for taking care of the earth, our conviction that no one should go hungry, our belief that what we do in the world is part of the life of the reign of God. We witness such things, we participate in them, and gradually the joyful realization comes: Jesus is alive. Christ is risen. *Christ is risen, indeed!*

Easter is not just for this one day. It's not so hard to feel the "alleluias" here together. But it's both harder and more necessary to live out the hope of Easter on, say, a random Wednesday when a friend has gotten some really bad news, or a child is crying, or another shocking act of violence takes your breath away. That's when the Easter hope we carry becomes the Easter hope we share. Not an idle tale but the life of Jesus in us. Thanks be to God, Christ is risen! *Christ is risen, indeed!*

Resources:

Journal for Preachers, vol. XLV, no. 3, Easter 2022

"Do We Need a Raised Body?" *The Christian Century*, April 6, 2022