Luke 24:1-12

24But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had
prepared. 2They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3but when they went in, they did not find
the body. 4While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside
them. 5The 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. 6Remember how he told you,
while he was still in Galilee, 7that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified,
and on the third day rise again." 8Then they remembered his words, 9and returning from the tomb, they
told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother
of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11But these words seemed to
them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12But 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.

Easter Sunday

April 21, 2019

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In Jerusalem, right beside the Garden of Gethsemene, there is a Roman Catholic basilica called the Church of All Nations. Right outside the church is a sign for everyone to read: NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE THE CHURCH. Of course that sign is intended for tour guides and groups who might disturb the prayerful silence of the church with overly loud lectures of all the details of church architecture, art and legends about when Jesus knelt to pray on the night before he was crucified. But I've come to believe is excellent advice for any church. Especially on Easter. If you came here looking for explanations, I'm sorry. I don't have any for you. How could the tomb be empty? How could a person be raised from the dead? I don't know. I can't give you an explanation of the resurrection, of Easter. That's why I came here. Or at least why I came back to church years ago. Looking for an explanation. When I was a kid, I was raised on Bible stories that my mother would read to us before bed. She and my dad took us to church when we were little and we spent every Sunday at Sunday School of Mountain View United Methodist Church. But then when I was 12 and my older brother was 13, we quit. We didn't want to go anymore. Church didn't make sense. Those Bible stories didn't make any sense. We had more important things to do—football, music, girls, sleeping in on Sundays, all became

more important to my life than stories about God that I didn't believe and didn't really understand. And so for a few years, I didn't go to church. I didn't pray. I don't think I even thought about God. And then things started to fall apart. It was the summer I was fifteen. That's when my parents split up. That's when I began to wonder if things that had always been so constant in my life were actually all that dependable. I still didn't believe in God, but I began to wonder. I still didn't believe in God, but I knew people who did.

I wanted some explanations. I wanted to know why things happened the way they did. And it seemed to me that religion didn't have any explanations that made sense, that it was mostly wishful thinking.

Isn't Easter just wishful thinking? Let's be serious about this. The resurrection of Jesus is not an easy concept to explain. And if you came today hoping to hear a rational explanation of how this happens, you're going home disappointed. People don't just get up out of tombs, not in my experience anyway, even with my rose-colored glasses. It has been said that "if you don't find resurrection a little hard to believe, you probably aen't taking it very seriously." And the disciples certainly don't. If you read the four gospel stories, one of the connections between them is the element of surpise. Remember that Jesus predicted his death, and his resurrection, on more than one occasion. So when he is raised from the dead, what is the response of Jesus' followers? No one says, "I knew it!" "Just like he predicted." No one even says, "Praise God!" They don't believe it. They act like they didn't know it was coming. They don't believe. And this is especially true in the story that Luke tells.

The women go to the tomb early that Sunday morning, expecting to find and dead body. They have no expectation that he has been raised. They don't go there wondering, "Gee, I wonder if his body will still be there?" They go expecting to anoint a body. When they see these two men in dazzling clothes, they are stunned, surprised, shocked.

They run to tell the rest of the disciples. And how do they take it? Do they say, "Oh yeah, now I remember! He told us this would happen." No, they don't believe the women. In fact, Luke says that

those who received the testimony of the women regarded their message as an "idle tale." That's actually a fairly generous translation of the Greek word "leros." That word, you see, is the root of our word "delerious." [1] So the diciples thought that what the women said was crazy, that they were off their rockers.

Can you blame them? Resurrection isn't something that is in our normal experience. And let's be clear. This isn't resusitation, it's not a dead person coming back to life, to the life they had before, like Lazarus even. Resurrection is the claim that God comes into human history in order to create an entirely new reality. And this can be upsetting. As Anna Carter Florence, preaching professor at Columbia Seminary says, "if the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on? Resurrection breaks all the rules."[2]

Which is why we try to downplay it sometimes. We populate Easter with pretty spring flowers that somehow symbolize new life, we have visits from the Easter bunny and we have eggs and candy and break out the spring clothes and bonnets and isn't it wonderful that winter is over. We try to imagine that Easter is a natural thing, that it doesn't throw us for a loop, that it doesn't seem just a little bit crazy, a little bit delerious.

Except sometimes. It was a year ago yesterday that my father-in-law, Kevin O'Sullivan passed away. When he was in the hospital last Easter, Erin dropped everything and went to be with him. And when he passed we quickly headed for North Carolina to be with Erin's stepmother and all the family. We stayed for the funeral mass a week after he passed. As good Irish Catholics there was a day of viewing of the body and meeting with the family and friends. The night before the mass, my mother-in-law asked me if I would say a few words at the at the funeral home on behalf of the family. I said I would, but I didn't get much sleep the night before the mass. What would I say? What could I say to a grieving widow? What do you say to these young adults in Erin's family who have experienced way too

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1 Lose, David. WorkingPreacher.org
2 Florence, Anna Carter

much death at their age? What do you say to these family and friends who are full of grief, who are full of doubt about God and his mercy and whether he is there or not? Do I try to help them work through their grief and say goodbye to their father, husband, grandfather? What words to we have to say in the face of death? What can fill the emptiness?

The symbol of Easter is the empty tomb. You can't really show emptiness. It's not like Christmas where we can have a pageant with shepherds and wise men and an innkeeper and a baby in a manger. The tomb was empty. But even so, the disciples didn't believe until they saw Jesus and spoke to him. I mentioned early this morning that the earliest Christian writings are not the gospels, but the letters of Paul. And Paul never mentions the empty tomb, not once. It is not the empty tomb that convinced the disciples of the reality of the resurrection. It was the presence of the living Christ. It was meeting Christ on the Damascus road that changed Paul's life. It is not knowing that something happened to his body that convinces disciples throughout the ages, it is experiencing Christ in their lives.

So what did I say to those nieces and nephews, to my mother in law and to Erin's sisters? What do I say to my wife and my children? That death does not have the final word. Love and life are stronger than fear and death. We can expect to see those we have loved who are now gone from our sight. That they and we and our future are in the hands of a God who loves us more than we can imagine. Death and loneliness may bring tears, but the Easter story is one not of emptiness but of joy beyond expectation, of the triumph of love over loss. Is it wishful thinking? Is it too good, maybe a little too crazy to be true? But if we believe in the God that we proclaim as a God who is love, who loves each of us, beyond all measure, then perhaps it is just too good not to be true. Love conquers. He is risen. He is risen indeed.