

“Wishful Thinking”

Luke 24:1-12

March 27, 2016 Easter Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

My wife often accuses me of having rose-colored glasses. She thinks I'm unrealistic, that I'm a romantic, that I don't see life as it really is. I suppose that's true. I guess I do think that things will turn out all right in the end, so maybe I don't prepare for the difficult times as I should. I suppose I don't really worry about that old tree in my backyard because there's really not much chance that it will fall and hit anything important, even if it does really sway in interesting ways when the wind blows. I like to think that I believe the best about people—they really wouldn't do things that are petty or self-serving or even mean—not intentionally anyway, right? And I really do believe that this year the Cubs may truly make it to the World Series. Unrealistic? Romantic? Rose-colored glasses? I guess. Maybe it's all just wishful thinking.

The Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner says that “Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about judgment and hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept. Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-up is wishful thinking. Interplanetary travel is wishful thinking. Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it.”¹

Is Easter just wishful thinking? Let's be serious about this. The resurrection of Jesus is not an easy concept. 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 aren'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 surprise. Remember that Jesus predicted his death, and his resurrection, on more than one occasion. So when he is raised from the dead, what is

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking*.

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 a 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 "delirious."² So the disciples 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 resuscitation, 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."³

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,

² Lose, David. WorkingPreacher.org

³ Florence, Anna Carter

a little bit delirious.

Except sometimes. A lot of you know that my brother in law, Kerry O'Sullivan died two weeks ago. When he was in the hospital Erin and I dropped everything and hurried back to New Jersey to try to see him before he died. We didn't make it in time, but we felt we had to be there for his four children, all in their 20s, but in a way alone in the world since their mother also died three years ago. We stayed for the funeral mass a week ago last Tuesday. 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 neices and nephews asked me if I would say a few words at the service 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 do you say to these four young adults who have experienced way too 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? What words do 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 do I tell those kids, my neices and nephews? 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.