

First Presbyterian Church, Wausau
Rev. Rachel A. Wann
They Were Perplexed – March 27, 2016

Nature writer Patrick McManus, included in a book of his, a chapter entitled, "Strange Scenes and Eerie Events (From *Never Sniff a Gift Fish*)

Every day weird things happen for which there are no rational explanations. Take, for example, the case of Retch Sweeney's watch. Retch and I were trolling on a lake in Canada several years ago and, as he leaned over the side of the boat to net a nice rainbow trout I was bringing in, Retch's watch came loose from his wrist and fell into the lake. Not only was the watch expensive, but it held great sentimental value: Retch's wife had given it to him on their twentieth anniversary. It bore the inscription, "To Charley Bombi, for 40 years dedicated service to Acme Sand & Gravel Co." Retch's wife is a great one for sentiment.

Five years after Retch lost his watch in the Canadian lake, he and I went on a boat-camping trip on a lake in Montana. It is important to note that there is no waterway connecting the two lakes. After making camp, Retch and I went out to see if we couldn't hook into one of the monster rainbows reported in the vicinity. Sure enough, as we trolled past the mouth of a stream, Retch's rod whipped double and a few seconds later a beautiful rainbow was doing aerial gymnastics. We went back to camp and while I started preparing supper, Retch dressed out his fish. Suddenly he let out a great yell. I rushed over to see what had happened.

"Look what I found in this rainbow," he shouted, holding up a shiny object.

"I can scarcely believe my eyes," I said. "How could such a thing happen?"

"Beats me," Retch said. "I've never even heard of anybody finding a bottle cap in the stomach of a fish before."

"Me either," I said. "Now if it had been the watch you lost in the lake up in Canada, I could understand that. You read in the newspapers all the time about that sort of thing happening."

Now all kidding aside we've all heard those far out tales of extreme coincidence and extraordinary occurrences that seem to defy all rational explanation. They make for wonderful human interest stories on the evening news – like the Cincinnati Reds fan who amazingly caught back to back home runs or the kid who buys a Polaroid camera at a garage sale and finds a photo still in the camera – he shows the photo to his grandmother, who tells him it's a photo from the late 1970's of his now deceased uncle.

Of course sometimes these types of bizarre stories aren't true at all. And to keep from falling victim to tall tales or urban legends, many of us have adopted an attitude of skepticism, especially with the rampant amount of misinformation that can be found on the internet. We've learned not to take

things at face value – if it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't. The e-mail that claims we've inherited a fortune from some long lost relative in Nigeria is most assuredly a hoax. A scam to dupe us out of paying upfront legal fees so that we can easily claim our inheritance. A practical joke among friends is one thing. A scam that preys on the weak and the vulnerable is an outrage.

Doubt is a natural human reaction. It is a defense mechanism that we develop to protect ourselves from being deceived or cheated. We are routine creatures who live in a fairly routine world, so when faced with a scenario that transcends the expected, we not surprisingly respond with doubt. In childhood we have an openness that allows for multiple perspectives for interpreting the world around us. But as our rational minds develop, we are no longer as swayed by fanciful thinking.

Now I say all this because the very basis of our faith as Christians defies all rationality. It challenges reasonable thought. And perhaps we are fooling ourselves if we say that we have never questioned either Jesus' resurrection and/or what that means in our lives. And perhaps a few of us question it more often than not.

Is it okay to doubt, you might wonder?

Well, the resurrection story of Jesus was greeted by skepticism the very first time it was told. In our lesson from Luke's gospel this morning, when the women had returned to the Eleven and all the other disciples and told them what they had seen at the empty tomb, the story was greeted with disbelief and doubt. Our translation uses the words, "it seemed to them an idle tale." A silly, foolish story, utter nonsense. Even those who had been right there with Jesus had a hard time accepting what they were being told by the women who had visited Jesus' tomb.

Of course no one could have anticipated the scenario they faced that morning. When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and the other woman set out for the tomb before dawn that morning, they had only one thing on their minds – to finish preparing Jesus' body for his burial, work that had been interrupted by the Sabbath. Once the Sabbath was over, they could continue their plans.

These women were identified in Luke's gospel as having been with Jesus throughout his ministry in Galilee. They had witnessed his crucifixion, and they saw Joseph of Arimathea take the body of Jesus, wrap it in a linen cloth, and lay it in a tomb. Now that the Sabbath was over, the women went early to the tomb. In the darkness they'd have a better chance of avoiding any Roman soldiers who might be standing guard.

Filled with grief and sadness, they had no expectations of what they might find. Their biggest concern of the morning was how they'd manage to roll away the stone so they could begin their work. Anointing Jesus' body with the spices they had prepared was the final act of devotion that they could perform for their beloved teacher. As they approached I can imagine each woman lost in her thoughts, replaying in her mind memories of things Jesus had said or done. Recollecting those

moments of joy, recalling his stories about God's kingdom, remembering his acts of healing and how he showed love and kindness to those who were often overlooked. These positive memories of Jesus sustained them through their intense grief.

When they discovered the stone rolled away, they entered the tomb. Nothing was there. Perhaps a bit of hesitation, a bit of a pause – are we in the right tomb? Yes, we saw his body being placed in here – yet there is nothing here. For a moment they were perplexed. They looked askance at one another, and then suddenly two brightly shining figures appeared next to them. The women all fell to the ground with their faces averted. In an instant, bewilderment turned to fear.

The angels said to the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but he has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?" And suddenly in the midst of all their musings, they DID remember what Jesus had said. And fear unexpectedly turned to joy.

They **had** heard the words that Jesus had said on those few occasions. That he would die at the hands of sinners and then rise again, but at the time it made no sense to them. Rising again? That's a whole new concept. Way beyond what they could have ever hoped or dreamed. Definitely too good to be true. The possibility of that truly occurring never even entered their minds. But now that they had actually experienced what he said would take place, it was beginning to make a little bit of sense to them.

Their joy must have been immense. To what can we compare it? Sort of like what someone might feel if a loved one finally comes out of an extended coma or makes it safely through a risky operation. Or surviving a deadly tornado that descends without warning. Expecting the worst, having little hope for any positive outcome, yet the best possible result occurs. Intense relief, mingled with astonished joy. Desperation turned to hope.

The women went running back to share this exciting news with the other disciples. Perhaps they were all talking at once, trying to get the story out, and all the other disciples didn't get it. They were still caught up in their own grief, their own dismay about what happened. They were not convinced by the words of the women, maybe a bit intrigued, but not willing to accept the words at face value. Even Peter - who jumped up and ran off to see the empty tomb for himself - even he was not completely sure. He was amazed by what he saw, but that's as far as it went.

Why was it so hard for the other disciples to believe? Just like the women, all the disciples had heard Jesus talk about his death and then rising on the third day. So when the women came back with the news, shouldn't they have been at least a little bit receptive, even willing to believe, instead of passing it off as an idle tale? Let's go back to that first point, about news seeming too good to be true. How do we respond to it, beyond the initial stage of skepticism? Have you ever experienced

such exciting news that all you can say is, "I can't believe it! I can't believe it!" News that is so overwhelming, it's really hard to take it all in.

Pastor and theologian Tom Long recounts a story told to him by a friend. The man had a young son who was a huge fan of both Mr. Rogers and Captain Kangaroo. The boy couldn't get enough of his television heroes and watched their shows faithfully. One day came the announcement that Mr. Rogers would guest star on the Captain Kangaroo show. The little boy was thrilled. Both his idols on the same show. He couldn't believe it. Every morning he would excitedly ask, "Is today the day?" And then finally the momentous day arrived. The boy's entire family gathered around the television to see, and there was Mr. Rogers and Captain Kangaroo, side by side. The little boy watched for a few moments, but then got up and drifted out of the room.

The father was puzzled by his son's disappearance and followed him. He asked son, "What is it, son? Is something wrong?" And the boy answered, "It's too good. It's just too good." (From *Empty Tomb, Empty Talk*, by Thomas Long)

Perhaps that's what happened to the disciples. It was just too good. The news of the empty tomb. The news that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Maybe it was just too much for them to take in all at once. They needed time to deal with it a bit. Time to let it sink in.

It can be somewhat comforting to know that even those first disciples were awash with skepticism and doubt. I think it makes them seem a bit more real to us, that they reacted in such a human way. It makes the story of what happened more believable. Their initial doubt shows that there is hope for us. The empty tomb wasn't quite enough. They finally were able to believe when they stood in the presence of the Risen Lord. Their doubts were assuaged. In that moment, everything he had ever said and done, everything he stood for, finally found its fulfillment. And their lives were about to get very interesting. They had a message, an exciting story of extravagance, and they were bursting at the seams to tell someone.

If the Risen Christ was able to transform them, then the same can be said for us. The power and love of God is never thwarted by our unstable faith or our low expectations. We have not seen the Risen Christ in person, as the early disciples did, but we have experienced him in our hearts. Sometimes it may seem to us, too good to be true. But we can come on Easter morning, stand at the entrance of the empty tomb, and hear the whisper of angelic voices murmuring, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but he has risen." It's much more than we could have ever expected or imagined in our wildest dreams. But my friends, this is no idle tale. This is the message of the gospel.