

"An Idle Tale" – Luke 24:1-12 – April 21, 2019

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Early on the first day of the week, the women who had followed Jesus, went to the tomb before it was light. These were the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others who are not named. They had witnessed his crucifixion and had seen his broken body taken down from the cross and placed inside a borrowed tomb. Because it was almost time for the sabbath to begin, they had to wait until Sunday to care for his body in the custom of their people, that of preparing and placing spices and wrapping him in clean cloths.

In their intense grief, and mourning the cruel death of their teacher and beloved friend, the women had this one last act of love and devotion to carry out for him. Perhaps they were still caught up in the shock and the disbelief that comes alongside any human tragedy we experience. Perhaps they saw their task of caring for his body as a mundane but necessary ritual to ground them before they could succumb to the pain of their loss. And so, each woman approached the tomb expectantly. They had a job to do, and they were going to do it. Nothing could prepare them for what they were about to discover.

We come to church on Easter Sunday to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We announce to all who would hear – He is risen – and we respond – He is risen indeed. This is and has been the central tenet of Christianity for over 2000 years. The resurrection defines who we are – we are the people who follow a Risen Lord.

But what does that mean? If someone were to ask any one of us what we believe about resurrection, very likely we would all have different answers. Easter is perplexing, and we struggle to make sense out of that which seems so nonsensical. One commentator wrote, "If you don't find resurrection at least a little hard to believe, you're not taking it seriously." Folks, resurrection defies rationality.

When the woman arrived at the tomb, their expectations were squashed. They expected to find a body, they expected to anoint and wrap it, they expected to go home with their grief. Instead, they discovered an empty tomb. And they were perplexed. When we expect something, and that something is not realized, we become perplexed. That's a great word. It means puzzled, confused, mystified, confounded, stunned – you get the picture.

And then Luke tells us, in their perplexity, a couple of angelic beings arrived to offer an explanation. Ah, relief. Finally, we'll get some answers. Our confusion will be abated. Someone will tell us what happened to the dead body. Yeah.....no. That's not what happened. The angelic beings startled the women even further when they confronted the women with a question and a surprising statement – they asked, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but he has risen." Then they reminded the women of what Jesus had told them previously – Jesus had warned his disciples about his upcoming death and subsequent resurrection. And the women remembered. As if a

lightbulb turned on and the truth illuminated, the women remembered what he said. So, they went back into the city, to the men, and the women shared with them this astonishing message.

The men, after hearing this message from the women, were not perplexed, they were skeptical. They didn't believe the women. They thought it was an idle tale. The biblical translators apparently wanted to give the story a PG rating, but the Greek word here is more akin to this statement – "that's a load of B.S." Perhaps attached to their disbelief at such an unlikely tale, was also a bit of misogyny. In that time, women were not considered to be a reliable witness. However, something about what they said caught Peter's attention. Something caused him to get up and run to the tomb himself. And seeing the empty tomb, the linen cloths folded up, Luke tells us Peter was amazed.

When we have expectations, when we expect to find or discover that a certain thing is so, when we are confronted with something else, we react with confusion. We become perplexed. That's not what we thought we would find. And in trying to make sense out of the unexpected, our rational minds are going to attempt to find a logical answer. So when the women discover the empty tomb, and experience perplexity, their confused minds are not going to come up with something that defies logic. "Okay. hmmm. Empty tomb, no body. That must mean he rose from the dead!" Not the first place any of us would go.

Why is that so hard to believe? Because that's not the way things work. We humans have a pretty good understanding of cause and effect. There is a natural progression of things. Preacher and professor Anna Carter Florence asked, "If the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on?" Resurrection breaks all the known rules. Resurrection messes up our understanding of how the world works. It throws things out of whack. Experience has taught us that death is final.

The disciples scoff at the idle tale that women bring back to them, because it goes against everything they know. But Peter reacts differently. Idle tale? Perhaps. It's outrageous. But maybe it's a little too outrageous...The idle tale stirs in Peter the possibility of "what if...?" And when the possibility of "what if..." is formed, then that possibility allows for change to happen. "What if..." opens us to something new. What if Jesus was raised from the dead? What if death isn't final? And with that spark of wonder, Peter is open to changing his expectations. And we know that eventually all the disciples get to that point. Where they no longer think that the message the women brought back from the tomb was an idle tale. Resurrection met those early disciples in their grief and turned their expectations inside out. Because Jesus has risen, death may be real, but it no longer has the final word.

Expectations are hard to change. Our expectations are based on and formed by what we know and experience to be true. What we experience in this life profoundly effects what we then expect from life. The more we experience life, the more we come to understand that life is hard. Life is not always fair. And we don't always get the happy ending. For some, life can be so difficult that they learn to live by a particular philosophy – that if you expect the worst, you won't be disappointed when things

go awry. Some may think that that is simply pessimism. But what if it is more? What if expecting the worst is a reaction to so many dreams curtailed, to so many doors closed, for relationships that have fallen apart, for yet another miscarriage, for the biopsy that came back positive...When so many things go wrong, or when life delivers that debilitating blow, our expectations focus only on the cold, hard reality. Darkness wins out.

But here's the thing – when we believe in resurrection, it is not just assenting to, or saying "yes" to the claim made by the women in the Easter story, saying "yes" to resurrection is also "saying 'no' to the power of death and destruction that surrounds us." (quote from Arthur Hultgren, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1581) When we come to know and experience the Risen Lord first hand, like those early disciples, it changes everything. It allows for the possibility of "what if..." to enter in, and we learn to expect new life in the dark places. It doesn't mean we won't have dark places. It means that the darkness, does not have the final word.

But when we believe in resurrection, when we can imagine, like Peter, the possibility of "what if..." - that maybe in fact, Jesus IS risen, we open ourselves to being able to see and experience life coming out of the darkness. When once we experienced only the darkness and finality of the tomb, we may now glimpse hope, we may now claim that death, destruction, chaos will no longer prevail. "What ifs" open the door for new life. Hope becomes real. Mystery challenges rationality. And our expectations are no longer constrained by what seems logical.

On that first dark Easter morning, engulfed by their grief, and expecting to find only the dead body of Jesus, the women discovered something more – a message – "He is not here, but he has risen." The women allowed their perplexity to become belief and they took that message with them, proclaiming it to the men. The men were skeptical in their reception of what they thought an idle tale, but Peter saw a glimmer of something more. Expectations were challenged. "What ifs" were made possible. And they all came to find life in what seemed only to be death and darkness.

On this Easter Sunday, so many years later, the message is still "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but he has risen." Confronted by an empty tomb and a message that defies all expectation, is resurrection just an idle tale to be dismissed? Or could it be something more, something beyond our wildest expectations?

