

“Believing An Idle Tale”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Psalm 118:1,4-5,17,19-24; Luke 24:1-12

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Easter Sunday

According to Bible of Wikipedia, the phrase, “follow the money” is only about forty years old, with its familiarity traced to the character of Deep Throat in the Watergate film, “All the President’s Men.” The idea is, if you follow the money, you will find more than is easily apparent, and perhaps even more than you want to know.

In the story of Jesus’ crucifixion, we followed the money with Judas, who was paid and then returned thirty pieces of silver. Yet, that trail ended in betrayal on Thursday night. To find more than is apparent, perhaps even more than we want to know, the Gospel of Luke turned our eyes us to “follow the women.” In particular Luke follows the women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. If there had been surveillance cameras at Friday afternoon crucifixion, we would notice them standing apart, silent, but attentive. Luke writes that after Jesus died on the cross, the crowds returned home, but “all Jesus’ acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.” (23:49)

Later on Friday, just before the Sabbath began at sundown, Pilate gave Joseph of Arimathea permission to remove Jesus’ body from the cross. He wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb hewn out of stone. Luke continues to focus those cameras on the women “who had followed Jesus from Galilee”, telling us “they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then the women returned [home], and prepared spices and ointments, [but because the Sabbath had begun], they rested according to the commandment.” (23:55-56)

The Sabbath ended at sundown on Saturday, but the women with their prepared spices would wait until the night had passed. We now follow the women again as they set out to perform the burial ritual. It is now Sunday, dawn is breaking, and Luke continues the story:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women 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 Jesus’ 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 Jesus’ 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 the women. 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.

Amazement, terror, confusion. These are the responses of this day at the empty tomb. None of the gospel accounts have anyone going to Jesus' tomb, and upon finding it empty, declaring, "How about that. Just what Jesus said would happen, happened. Let's call this day Easter, go home, dye some eggs and eat some Peeps!"

As we know when we have lost a loved one to death, the disciples and friends likely could not see through their tears of grief, or think past the tragedy and mixed feelings of the past week. Some would also be harboring feelings of guilt for denying or fleeing from their friend. So, what they did not find in the tomb brought more shock than recollection of what Jesus had said. It was not an "aha" moment, where anyone said, "Now all the pieces fit together." So, in each Gospel account of the resurrection, someone has to explain. Yet, fact checking the four gospels does not bring a confidence of consistency. Their stories don't match.

In Matthew, it is a single angel and in John, a pair. In Mark it is a young man, and in Luke two men in dazzling clothes who tell the news Jesus is not to be found, for he has been raised. On that morning, and even to this day, the question is who will believe what has been said?

Up until this morning, while tragic and painful, up until now, the events of the past week can be explained, and thus believed. We know about betrayal, and are well aware we could have been Peter who denied knowing Jesus, or with the other disciples who fled out of fear. We know Jesus did not receive the same justice as someone with means, and understand innocent people can be found guilty when those in power have connections to make sure it happens. Up until now, up until the women went to the tomb, we can tell the story of Jesus' final days and most everyone will believe a good man was betrayed, arrested, convicted in a mock trial, and crucified on a cross. It could be a newspaper article. It is a believable tale.

But this morning, everything changed, not because of what was found, but the evidence that was missing. Resurrection cannot be backed up by hard fact, even with surveillance cameras. So when the women believed, and went and told the apostles, it was deemed an idle tale.

For two thousand years, the church has been believing that idle tale as truth. Even so, it would have been easier if it all had ended with the cross, if death and burial, had been the end of the story. If the tomb had not been empty, and people could have just revered Jesus as a martyr. His teachings would be put on posters as guidelines for being kind and caring, loving and peaceful. Some might even uplift his words on economic equality and social justice, or the challenge to love and pray for one's enemies. Yet, therein lies the benefit of martyrs. We are not bound to their teachings; we can pick and choose what we believe of what they said and did; so, if Jesus is just a dead martyr, we can opt out of loving and praying for our enemies, or anyone else who crosses us (so to speak.)

Resurrection takes away Jesus' martyrdom. If we believe God defeated the cross, the power of evil, death, with resurrection, Jesus is more than a martyr, and his life cannot be contained within the bounds of an obituary. Not only that, but resurrection actually puts the cross back in play. If we believe the words at the tomb, that we cannot find the living among the dead, if we consider Jesus the Lord of life, then his living command for us to take up his cross is still with us.

All this is contingent on us believing the idle tale, which has no evidence, and seems impossible. Yet, there is a part of us that believes all things are possible, that anything can happen. Last Sunday night, Josh Gibson forgot that anything can. No, not the famous Negro Leagues great baseball player, but a modern day Josh Gibson.

He and his young son were in Oklahoma City and had a five hour trip to make back home to Texarkana, Texas. Ten miles into the 300 mile drive, he began receiving phone calls asking him where he was. You see, he was the brother in law of one of the Texas A&M basketball coaches, and had been seen on television behind the team's bench during their NCAA playoff game. When the team was down 12 points with just 44 seconds left in the game, he decided to beat the traffic home. After all, all that was left was the weeping for the loss. Then, upon leaving, what is said to be the biggest comeback in the last minute of a college basketball game occurred. The impossible happened, and in less than thirty seconds, Texas A&M closed the gap, tied the game and forced an overtime.

In sports, where we witness such things as immaculate receptions, even if we say anything can happen, we know it usually doesn't; yet, it is the "but it just might" that keeps us in our seats, quoting Yogi Berra's wisdom, "It ain't over until it's over."

I think Easter is a mix of it is over, but it is not yet over. Jesus' death was an ending, it was over. Resurrection is not resuscitation, not a second chance or sequel, not even a continuation of a story. Death was real. Resurrection marks a new beginning, a new day, a new story, yet it is all linked to believing nothing is impossible.

I found this sense of "nothing is impossible" in a sermon preached last Easter by Tim Simpson. He confessed he "preaches the same sermon every year on Easter about Walter Brueggemann's suggestion that we consider Easter a verb," and God being "in the business of Eastering." [Simpson, Timothy, "We Are Called to Be an Eastering Presence," in *Journal for Preachers, Easter 2016*, p. 17.]

He shared, if "Easter is a verb, [and] God is in the business of Eastering, if you take that seriously, then, my goodness, the things that you imagine going on in the world aren't really going to last. If the dead aren't going to remain in the tombs, then maybe the poor aren't going to stay poor. Maybe the sick aren't going to stay sick. Maybe the empires of the world that seem to rule and have their sway for decades and generations and seem to be here for time and eternity, maybe they're not going to last. That is what the Scripture has to say about God's Eastering activity." [Ibid., p. 18.]

Tim Simpson preached that sermon when he was in the last stages of metastatic kidney cancer. In the sermon, he admitted "...we're happy to accept that God is going to Easter us, and we're not going to be left in the grave." Yet, he said we then, "kind of build a firewall, so that Easter has [only] to do with Jesus and with us going to heaven. But most of the rest of the time, we still imagine the world is still the way the world is." Then he challenged his congregation: "Sisters and brothers, we have been touched by that empty tomb, [but] not just to get us into glory. We've been touched by that empty tomb to be agents of change in the world..." [Ibid.] One reason I was drawn to this sermon is that Tim Simpson died from his cancer two days after preaching it. I can't imagine doing so; yet, what he revealed was he was not just considering what resurrection meant for him in his imminent death, but reflecting on what resurrection meant for him in the life he had been given.

Julia Esquivel wrote a poem emerging from the late twentieth century struggles and atrocities in her native Guatemala. In a time when family members could be taken at night and never be seen again, she could have easily titled it, "Threatened with Death"; instead, she named her poem, "Threatened with Resurrection," which for me transformed fear of the world surrounding her into a courage to speak and act against evil. [Julia Esquivel, Guatemalan poet and theologian, from her book, *Threatened With Resurrection: Prayers and Poems from an Exiled Guatemalan*, Brethren Press, 2nd Edition, published 1994]

She introduces the image this way:

What keeps us from sleeping is that they have threatened us with Resurrection!

She concludes her lengthy poem with an invitation:

Join us in this vigil and you will know what it is to dream! Then you will know how marvelous it is to live threatened with Resurrection! To dream awake, to keep watch asleep, to live while dying, and to know ourselves already resurrected!

"... how marvelous it is to live threatened with Resurrection! To know ourselves already resurrected."

For me, those are powerful images, which can take an idle tale of an empty tomb and give us courage to follow a Risen Christ, not a martyred Jesus. Most of the crowd on Friday saw the story end at the cross and went home. Luke followed the women. The women who followed Jesus from Galilee stayed, waited, and then opened a new story at the empty tomb – and then they told others.

Following the Risen Christ means we will not leave the game early, or fear taking up the cross, or hesitate to declare the world can be different, or balk at saying peace can come, and poverty can be ended, because Christ lives...Christ live in us...and because of that nothing is impossible.