

Keeping Alive the Idle Tale
Luke 24:1-11 (12)
Easter
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¹But 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.

Twenty-five years ago, I was in the middle of my second year in college, and I began to think about becoming a minister. So I signed up for an English class that they don't offer at my college any more, called "The Bible as Literature." That sounded good, but when I showed up on the first day of class, I had to swallow pretty hard. The professor announced he had dropped out of church a long time ago, and religious opinions would not be welcome in that class.

"It's possible to read the Bible without making any religious commitments," he said, "and that's the only way to get a good grade in this class." Week after week he emphasized the requirements of the class: read the text, deal with the text, appreciate the text, write papers on the text, but leave God out of it.

I had a lot of rebellious classmates who found his viewpoint refreshing. A couple of Jewish students said, "I never believed all that about Moses and the Red Sea." A few physics majors relished the opportunity to debunking New Testament miracles. One Methodist student from Long Island stood up one day and admitted, "Professor, it really feels good to scrape off the barnacles of Sunday School."

And when we got to the Easter stories in the New Testament, our teacher pulled out the proverbial chainsaw and started cutting away. "All the Gospel accounts differ," he pointed out. "There are variant translations of the verses which appear in all the footnotes." "The four Gospels and the churches they represent couldn't agree completely on anything," he said. "When it comes to all this resurrection stuff, it is a disputed account."

I walked out of class, stunned, shocked, not sure if I should drop out or return to defend what I had always been told. I didn't know what to do. All my life I had been raised around church-going folks, and this faith-free class on the Bible was starting to mess with me. And the next time the class was held, I went, probably out of habit, and probably because it was too late to drop a class without catching it from my parents. So I went.

Much to my surprise, somebody had sneaked in before class and written some graffiti on the blackboard. There were just two words: JESUS LIVES. Our professor was furious. When he came in and saw it, he bellowed, "Who wrote that?" Not waiting for an answer, he grabbed an eraser and started furiously to erase it. At the same time, he turned toward us and began what became an hour-long speech on the stupidity of Christians and the foolishness of faith.

Our professor was so wound up that he didn't notice that he was doing a poor job erasing the graffiti. Either that, or the blackboards had recently been washed and the words were remaining faintly on the blackboard. JESUS LIVES. He kept firing both barrels. No matter what that professor said that day, the message remained.

That was a long time ago. I've been to seminary and back. I still spend a lot of my time around church-going folks. But I will grant him this much: when it comes to all this resurrection stuff, he was right. It is a disputed account.

On the very first Easter Sunday, there were some people who didn't believe in the resurrection. I'm not talking about Annas, Caiaphas, or Pontius Pilate. I'm talking about the disciples of Jesus. There were eleven of them left, after Judas did his deed.

At the crack of dawn, Luke says five or more women went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away. They heard the testimony of two dazzling witnesses. They remembered what Jesus had told them. And when they run back to tell the eleven disciples, their words were quickly dismissed.

"You're making this up," the eleven said. "There's no way it could be true." The first Easter sermon by those women is regarded as "empty talk," "a silly story," "a foolish yarn," "utter nonsense," "sheer humbug." That should be a reminder to us, that in spite of all our alleluias, Easter was first regarded as an idle tale.

Part of this, of course, is because resurrection is difficult to believe. I keep telling my friend, the funeral director, that Jesus is going to put him out of business. He always replies by telling me how busy he is. People die. Everybody dies. Everything we love will pass away. That's just how it is. Some die at an early age, like Jesus. Most of us hope to grow old and eventually decline.

It is hard to believe that death has been destroyed. "As much as we loved Jesus," the eleven disciples undoubtedly declared, "it is impossible to believe that he is alive ... again." They called it "an idle tale."

But not only is the message difficult to believe. The first messengers were women in a men's world. Luke is not ashamed to report some ancient sexism at work among the disciples. We already know that, of course. Did you notice, for instance, that only the men get counted? There were eleven. How many women were there? Luke says three by name, and mumbles that there were others

As one scholar points out, around ancient Jerusalem, women took no part in public life. When a woman walked outside her home, she was required to hide her face with two veils. She was expected to remain unobserved in public places, to walk a few steps behind every male in her party, and to cross the street if another man walked toward her. Women were forbidden to read, teach, speak, or pray out loud in the synagogue. More to the point, they were regarded as unreliable witnesses in a court of law¹. "From women let not evidence be accepted," reads the *Mishnah*, "because of the levity and temerity of their sex."²

But Luke says the women "kept insisting" that the tomb was empty and the angels had spoken. The more those men dismissed their words, the more those women kept insisting. It's striking that even though the four Gospels differ in their perspectives on Easter, all the stories agree on two facts: (1) the tomb of Jesus was empty, and (2) women were the first ones to testify to the resurrection. Even though it has taken two thousand years for a few parts of the church to begin to take women seriously, the Gospels insist: women were the first Easter preachers.

¹ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*.

² Thomas G. Long, "Empty Tomb, Empty Talk," *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2001, p. 11.

I take this to be more than a sociological observation; it is actually a crucial insight into the nature of the Easter message. Resurrection is not proclaimed from on high, from those who are accustomed to being in charge. No, the message comes from the sides, from the corners, from three steps behind, from the fringes of public opinion. That's where Easter has its power.

Witness, for instance, one of the recent decrees from the Pope. Two weeks ago, the Holy Father denounced football on Sundays. He declared, "When Sunday loses its fundamental meaning (as the day of resurrection) and becomes subordinate to a secular concept of weekend - dominated by such things as entertainment and sport - people can no longer see the heavens."³ Now, I'm sure that a lot of people I know laughed when they heard such a statement. Is it because he's wrong? No, I happen to think he's right. But when you enforce the Good News from on high, it ceases to come as good news. And it doesn't meet people in the crevasses of human need.

Opening day in Fenway Park was last Friday -- Good Friday. A lot of disappointed Red Sox fans weren't allowed to eat hot dogs on Good Friday. It might have gone a lot better if the church affirmed what we all know: those hot dogs aren't particularly good for you.

My point is that the Good News -- particularly the Good News of Easter -- always comes from the edges of human experience. It comes from those that nobody else will listen to. It comes from the graveyard where something both extraordinary and frightening has happened. As soon as you amplify the word of resurrection, it loses its voice. As soon as you domesticate it, it loses its edge. As soon as you institutionalize the Gospel, it loses its strange, mysterious power to get into the cracks of human life and to begin to do its work.

So here's what I need today: I need some people out there working the hallway. And whenever anybody comes up and starts talking about jelly beans, chocolate bunnies, or fancy outfits, I want you to ask them, "Do you suppose that there's anything else after we die?" I mean, just ask the question. Crack it wide open. I need some subversive storytellers to keep the idle tale alive.

The best review that I read of Mel Gibson's Jesus movie was on the back page of *Entertainment Weekly*. Believe it or not, it was written by Stephen King, the horror novelist. He was fascinated by the buzz about the movie. He was also curious to see if Christians ate popcorn while their Savior was getting killed. (Turns out that some of them do.) Generally speaking, Stephen King liked the movie. He thought it was well done.

What concerned him, however, was the eight-year-old girl sitting next to him in the theater. Her mom was talking on her cell phone during some of the movie. At one point, she leaned over and said to the girl, "If it gets too bloody, just close your eyes."

King kept looking at the young girl. She covered her eyes for about fifteen minutes, but that left another fifty minutes of punishment, torture, cruelty, and death. That's a long time to cover your eyes when you're only eight. So after a while she started looking, and looking, and looking. King said, "I was ashamed to be there."

Then he said, "I think she'll be looking for a long time to come. In her dreams. In those dreams there will likely be no redemption, no victory over sin, no scripture, no eternal life ... only a skinless nightmare Christ with one eye swollen shut."⁴

Listen, Steven King knows that's not the whole story. Yes, Jesus died for our sins, and it was brutal. But that's not the whole story. Jesus was raised from the dead, just like he told us. He is alive. We've got to keep the "idle tale" alive.

³ Eric Convey, "Pope plays hardball with Sunday sports fans: Urges flock to pray not play," Boston Herald, 27 March 2004.

⁴ Stephen King, "The Passion of Alicia," *Entertainment Weekly*, 19 March 2004, 74.

There are a lot of people who want to take that story from us. They want to manage it, package it, sell it, and make a few bucks. There are people who want to market the resurrection of Jesus with the same kind of ferocity that they market the birth of Jesus. And if you thought jelly beans and chocolate bunnies were the competition, the marketing of our most sacred holy day has reached a new low. Last year, there were Easter baskets on sale at K-Mart filled with a Combat Vehicle Military play set for \$15.00. There's also the Wal-Mart version with an Army Tech action figure with automatic rifle and bazooka, for ages three and up. Wal-Mart's version was cheaper, at \$4.88.⁵

Listen, is that what Easter's about? Making a buck, capitalizing on conflict? Easter is about life, not death. It's about hope, not despair. It's about resurrection, not destruction. I need some people to help me get the story straight. I need some people to help me raise the question, "Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery?"⁶ I need some people from that revolutionary movement called "the church" to keep the story alive.

There are a lot of people who don't believe that God's love is stronger than death, that God's mercy is stronger than hate, that God's forgiveness is stronger than punishment. You know what kind of world this is. Every Easter hymn is a disputed testimony.

But we keep singing. We keep praying. We keep working for God's way in the world. And even if people sideline us and say, "You're irrelevant," even if they say, "You Christians are telling an idle tale," we keep telling it because it's the truth. Sooner or later, even those eleven old disciples in Jerusalem are going to learn it's the truth.

One of my favorite Easter stories comes from Russia in 1930. A communist leader (remember the communists?) by the name of Nikolai Bukharin traveled from Moscow to Kiev to give a speech on atheism. The communist party had forced a large crowd to gather, and with a captive audience, Bukharin just let it fly. For a complete hour, he hurled insults and arguments against the Christian church. And he was pretty good at it. His large audience listened fearfully. He began to sum it up:

"Therefore," he said, "there is no God: Jesus Christ never existed; there is no such thing as a Holy Spirit. The Church is an oppressive institution. The Church is out of date. The future belongs to the State, and the State is in the hands of the Communist Party."

He was about to sit down when an old priest near the front stood up. 'May I say a few words?' he asked. (It's three in English, but he was of course speaking Russian.) The Lecturer, disdainfully, gave him permission. He turned, looked out over the crowd, and shouted: 'Christ is risen!' Back came the roar of the people, shouting the words they had been saying by heart at the end of the Easter service in their churches, 'He is risen indeed!'"⁷

Brothers and sisters, we have been entrusted with some astonishing news, some disputed news, some disruptive news – Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Everything he's been doing he's going to continue doing, whether we see him or not.

Sisters and brothers, the world doesn't understand this yet, so we've got to keep the story alive.

⁵ Neal Rubin, "War Toys sour spirit of Easter," *The Detroit News*, March 23, 2003. Reported in *The Christian Century*. Retold by Lillian Daniel, New Haven, CT.

⁶ Eugene Peterson's translation of Luke 24:5 in *The Message*.

⁷ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1994) 53.