

Luke 24:1-12

*It Can't Be... Can it?*

Resurrection of the Lord/Easter Sunday ~ April 17, 2022

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### *Introduction*

I'm pretty sure you have heard the story I am about to read. You know what happens. So why do we need to hear it again? It is a great story. But has it become *your* story? We have good, common-sense reasons to resist it. It can't be, can it? It happened so far, far away. So long, long ago. We can hardly see the characters. They are hazy, distant and remote. Kind of like when we take a set of binoculars and turn them around, and look through the larger end. Today, as I read this story, I invite you to hold your binoculars like any good birder might right when they think they see an unexpected bird light upon a tree. Let God adjust the focus for you. I am sure that God has something for you to see in this story that you have never seen before. Just for a moment, as I read the scripture, try to look at it with fresh eyes. Imagine yourself as one of the women. As you approach the tomb, what do you see? Shadows taking form and color as the sun starts to rise? Perhaps you hear the birds' dawn chorus waking the day. In light of recent tragic events, how might you be feeling?

### *Sermon*

Why are *you* here today in this sanctuary, or remotely? "My mother made me." "We always go to church on Easter." "I heard that the FPC Brass Quartet is playing." "Free, homemade, baked with love, muffins right after church." There could be as many answers to my question as there are people worshipping right now. And while there are absolutely no wrong answers to the question of why you are here. I will give you mine: Because it's Easter, and we are Easter People! I have news for you, beloved Easter people: It's not about us. It's not about us looking good, acting perfect. It's not about us pretending we have our act together: shoes shined, closets cleaned, email inboxes emptied, digital photos organized, income taxes filed, tires rotated, credit cards paid off. No, that's *not* it. Being Easter people is about living into what God showed us that morning just outside of Jerusalem. Easter is about what God has done. Not us.

The story on the page is a messy, chaotic, trauma story that shudders with confusion and forgetting. First, the grief of Jesus' death. And next, even the body is gone. The women were perplexed. Then they were too shocked to remember anything that Jesus had told them. Brain fog. We know about that. In Luke's telling, all we get is the disturbing, disorienting shock of the empty tomb and an appearance of the two angel-ish type men to tell them "He is not here, but has risen." It's not like in John, where Christ appears to Mary Magdalene and calls her by name (John 20:16). Nor is it like Matthew and Mark, where the women are promised that Jesus had already gone ahead and was waiting for them in Galilee (Matt 28:7, Mark 16:7). Perhaps most of all in Luke, we can see this as a trauma story. No one is happy or joyful, yet. Nothing is going as they expected.

Then, when the women excitedly told the eleven apostles what they had seen, no one believed them. Only in Luke do we get this tidbit: In v. 11: "These words seemed to them an idle

tale." The Greek word "*leros*" is translated here, as "idle tale." Funny thing about that Greek word "*leros*" it appears only once in the Bible, right here. And with good reason, it's actually a rather coarse word. In the Message Bible, Eugene Peterson renders it as, "but the apostles didn't believe a word of it, thought they were making it all up." I will let you in on a little Greek secret: "*leros*" literally meant, "nonsense, drivel, twaddle, hog wash, balderdash, baloney, rubbish" feel free to substitute your own favorite slang word that may be coming to mind, and you would be closer to the intent of the original Greek.

Yes, it seemed to them like nonsense, madness. Perhaps we could call it "resurrection madness." Because it doesn't make sense. We can't prove it like an equation. Or solve it with the quadratic formula. We aren't meant to. In fact, in the eyes of a world awash with cynicism, it does seem crazy. We are called "fools for Christ" because when Easter People face insurmountable barriers we don't give up. At first we say, "It can't be, can it?" And then we look for the possibility of God's glory to be revealed. In the most unexpected of ways.

We can learn from the women in today's story. They wondered, "Who will remove the stone for us?" But they went anyway. What about us? Let's be honest: The stones we face are legion: loss, illness, disappointment, depression, oppression, exploitation, grief, separation. We slam into boulders that refuse to budge. Again and again. Perhaps you are slamming into one right now. Certainly, with the brutal war raging against the Ukrainians; and the bold boulder known as the Covid pandemic, at every level we face stones that seem overwhelming and relentless. Death, destruction, depression and desolation. They cause us to ask, why? We all struggle with that one. God's wisdom, God's ways are certainly not our ways. No, we are not given answers to the "why" question very often.

But *we do know* that morning the stone had been removed. *We can affirm* that we gave Jesus our worst, and still, he did not stay dead. Death was not the end of it. God raised him to new life. Easter people, here's the good news: death does not have the final word. Nothing, not even death, can anything separate us from the love of God. There is *always* hope. Resurrection madness. Transformation happens. Not always. Not easily. Certainly not in the ways we expect. But God will not give up on you or on this world God sent Christ to save. To mend. To transform.<sup>i</sup>

Yes, new life, new beginnings can be ours. But maybe we are stuck because we are still looking for the living among the dead. The theme of the day, is where Jesus is *not*. "He is *not* here." We are called to notice where Jesus is not. If you are looking for Jesus and cannot find him, perhaps you are looking for the living among the dead. Perhaps you are grabbing on to something, trying to control and manipulate your situation, rather than letting Jesus guide you from the darkness into the light.

Here's the thing: We are not "resuscitation" people. We are Easter, or Resurrection People. There's a big difference. Trying to get something dead to come back to life in the same form: that is resuscitation. It might be nostalgia. But it's not transformation. For us this year, as we emerge from the COVID pandemic, we are enjoying the start of being "back to normal."

Going to ball games, concerts, eating together in our Fellowship Hall. Having Easter inside this sanctuary instead of out in the parking lot like last year, yes all this feels great. This is *also* our chance to be transformed. This is a new chance to let God create resurrection on every level.

*It started once with a plastic easter egg and a boy named Phillip. Phillip was born with Down syndrome, and by the time he was eight years old, was increasingly aware of the difference between him and other children. He attended a United Methodist Sunday school with a creative teacher. This teacher struggled with how to get the other kids to include Phillip as part of the group. One Easter he decided to give each of the children a great big empty plastic egg. It was a beautiful spring day and so he told the children to go outside and find a symbol of new life and put it in the egg and bring it back to the classroom. They would then mix them all up and open and share their new life symbols and surprises together, one by one. You can imagine they loved this activity. Soon the eggs were all on the table and they started opening them. One was a flower; another had a little butterfly in it. In a third had a rock. Each child explained what they chose. The teacher opened the next one and there was nothing in it. The other children said "that's not fair—that's stupid!—somebody didn't do it right." About that time, the teacher felt a tug on his shirt, and there was Phillip standing beside him.*

*"It's mine." Phillip said. And the children said, "You don't ever do things right, Phillip. There's nothing there!" "I did so do it," Phillip said. "It's empty—the tomb was empty!" The class was silent, a very full silence. And here's the resurrection miracle: from that time on, it was different. Phillip suddenly became a part of that group of 8-year-old children. They accepted him. He had been set free from his tomb of being different. The tomb of being "othered." Phillip died that summer. He had many things wrong with his small body. And so, an illness that other children could have quickly shrugged off, enveloped him completely. Phillip was buried from that church. And on that day at the funeral nine 8-year-olds, with their Sunday School teacher, marched right up to the altar and laid on it an empty plastic egg.<sup>ii</sup>*

Easter people know that Love wins. It may seem like "resurrection madness" to some. But Easter people know that transformation happens. That means we also know that Islamophobia will *not* win. Racism will *not* win. White supremacy is *not* of God, Jesus is not there: even if religion is still used to prop it up. That is why the church builds interfaith and interracial relationships. That's why we study books that make us uncomfortable. That's why we name out loud what is not true and choose to fight for the winning side, with all that we've got: the side of love.<sup>iii</sup>

Friends, this meal: this bread and this cup, give us everything we need for the battle. They are the food and the fuel of resurrection madness. As we savor, chew and swallow let us remember those who know only the bread of affliction right now. Those who wake up to face the threat of gun violence every day. Those who go to bed whose loved one was a victim of gun violence. Let us remember the Ukrainian woman who wrote in permanent ink on her toddler's back her child's name and a phone number, in case they got separated or she was killed. Remember those who are unhoused, and those who are "un-countried" with no hope of returning home. Friends, this is the bread of deliverance, the bread of joy and freedom. This is the chance to no longer live every day in survival mode. This is the cup that calls us to set aside our differences in the name of the one who died for us regardless of how we vote or what flag we fly openly, or secretly.

With this meal, God is calling us to a new vision, a resurrection vision of God's good shalom, to the work of transforming *"this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace."* This was how Dr. Martin Luther King put it in his "Beyond Vietnam" speech in 1968. And here is our takeaway, our invitation, also from King's speech: *"Now let us begin, let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful struggle for a new world."*<sup>iv</sup> ... Because of Jesus, I

know it can be. Let us pray,

*Lord of such amazing surprises*

*as put a catch in my breath*

*and wings on my heart,*

*I praise you for this joy.*

*too great for words,*

*but not for tears and songs and sharing;*

*for this mercy*

*that blots out my betrayals*

*and bids me begin again,*

*to limp on,*

*to hop-skip-and-jump on,*

*to mend what is broken in and around me,*

*and to forgive the breakers;*

*for this YES*

*To life and laughter,*

*To love and lovers,*

*And to my unwinding self;*

*For this kingdom*

*Unleashed in me and I in it forever,*

*And no ends to growing,*

*To choices,*

*To chances,*

*To calls to be just;*

*No dead ends to living,*

*To making peace,*

*To dreaming dreams,*

*To being glad of heart;*

*for this resurrection madness*

*which is wiser than I*

*and in which I see*

*how great you are,*

*how full of grace.*

*Alleluia<sup>v</sup>*

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<sup>i</sup> This idea was inspired by Jill J Duffield's Easter reflection in her Lenten devotional book, *Lent in Plain Sight: A Devotion through Ten Objects*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2020), p.164-165.

<sup>ii</sup> from "The Story of Philip" by Harry Pritchett Jr, in *St. Luke's Journal of Theology* (June 1979)

<sup>iii</sup> From Meg Peery McLaughlin, "The Great Plot Twist," *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 202, p.51.

<sup>iv</sup> Dr. King quoted by Debra Dean Murphy, Faith Matters: "Resurrection after insurrection," *Christian Century*, March 24, 2001, p.37.

<sup>v</sup> Ted Loder, "I Praise You for this Resurrection Madness," *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, (Lura Media: San Diego, CA, 1984), p. 123.