

Easter – 2022

Luke 24:1-12

Quite a few years ago, I heard that there is a tradition in the eastern Christian church of telling a joke to start every Easter sermon. The tradition comes from the idea of the joke that God played on Satan by Jesus' resurrection. Satan thought Jesus was dead, but the joke's on him.

I've told one of my favorites too many times and I thought I had run out, but recently I heard another one which I can share with you today. Be prepared, though, it's a groaner.

Picture ten rabbits standing in a row. Now picture them all taking one step back. Picture those same ten rabbits standing in a row. They all take another step back.

What do you have?

A receding hare line.

Easter and Christmas sermons are the hardest to write, because we've heard the story before, and what can I say new or in a different way? That being said, one line jumped out at me this year. On Easter morning, at early dawn, the women walked to the tomb with the spices they had prepared. They were expecting death, not life. But when they arrived to anoint the body, they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. When they ran inside, they were unable to find the body, **which left them perplexed** (vv. 1-4).

The story of Jesus' death ends with his disciples having an enforced rest -- a break before they can rush to the tomb. "On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment" are the closing words of chapter 23 of Luke. "But," begins chapter 24.

In the days when these stories were told (instead of written), the "but" would have followed right on the heels of the day of rest. The lectionary, the suggested Bible readings for the day, divides the passage from Luke today, so we miss the abrupt stop in the action for the sabbath and the sense of hurry as soon as the women can head for the tomb. They arrive at the tomb, find it empty, go in "... but they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus."

Ever sensitive to the Jewishness of his subjects, Luke carefully links the astounding newness of the Resurrection to a respect for such basic traditions as obedient Sabbath observance. The last part of Luke 23:56, "But by the time they were finished the Sabbath had begun, so they rested as required by the law" could be included as part of 24:1. According to the Mosaic commandments, everyone rested on the Sabbath.

Not until the "first day of the week," the day after the Sabbath, did any of the disciples move toward the tomb. Just as it was only the women disciples who had stayed at the cross to see where Jesus' body was taken, it is only the women who

venture out at the earliest hour possible to perform a final loving task for their master -- anointing his dead body for burial.

Luke's version does not offer any commentary about the movement of the stone from the tomb's entrance. The women do not seem to be either dismayed or disturbed by the stone's removal. They simply enter the tomb. The verb structure that announces "they did not find" Jesus' body suggests an active, diligent search. The women didn't just peek timidly in the doorway -- they entered fully into the tomb and proceeded to search high and low for Jesus.

Standing in the midst of this Easter miracle, the women are "at a loss," "perplexed," or "puzzled" about the whereabouts of Jesus' body. Still trying to comprehend Jesus in death as they did in life -- in wholly human terms -- they are stumped about what could have happened to the body they seek.

Two figures wearing "dazzling clothes" suddenly greet them and ask, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Why are you looking for signs of life in a graveyard?"

The women are then lectured on what Jesus has taught them and now instructed to "remember." Just as they were initially "puzzled" at Jesus' disappearance, they are now to "remember" the lessons Jesus gave them as they traveled together in Galilee.

The women immediately respond to the challenge. They do remember and are transformed and energized by the memory. The women not only "remember" Jesus' words -- but they also go beyond this basic directive given by the "two men" and proceed to tell "all this to the eleven and everyone" (v.9).

It is at this point in Luke's narrative that he finally offers the names of at least some of these women witnesses. Now that they are proclaimers of the gospel, their particular identities become important. Luke's text suggests that besides the three expressly named, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, there were other women as well who went to the tomb and heard the two men.

The disciples to whom they tell the story, though, dismiss the stunning news as "an idle tale" or "nonsense" -- or we might even say as "women's chatter." Of course, "they did not believe them." Today, we might dismiss it as "fake news."

There is a Greek term here, transliterated "lair'ose," which appears only one time in the New Testament. It is rendered into English as "idle talk," "nonsense," "delirious talk," "sheer imagination," "a fairy tale," "fables," "pure nonsense," "an idle tale," "foolish talk," "vain things," "stupid, useless talk," "fiction, a lie" and "madness."

The Message, a paraphrased version of scripture, not a translation, renders the scene this way: "but the apostles didn't believe a word of it, thought they were making it all up."

Theologian Anna Carter Florence renders "lair'ose," this way `@\$?%&!`*.

It is likely "lair'ose," is a vulgar term, St. Paul would call it skubala as he does in Philippians 3.8, something like "total BS," in modern American English. The disciples were tired, devastated, grieving, and depressed. They probably were not in a mood to hear something from *women* that they knew was impossible. You can perhaps forgive

them, but this would not have been the only resurrection in the Bible or that they would have known about.

There are at least eight and possibly more, resurrections of the dead, that is. There's Lazarus, of course, who wasn't just dead, you will recall, but was *really* dead. When Jesus arrived at his grave the people said that he was too late, because Lazarus was so long dead that, "he stinketh." But he was resurrected anyway.

In 1 Kings there's the resurrection of the widow's son at Zarephath. (1 Kings 17:17-22) And then, in 2 Kings we have the resurrection of the Shunammite's son (2 Kings 4:18-37) and the resurrection of the man who was thrown into Elisha's grave (2 Kings 13:20). In Mark 4, there's the resurrection of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:41) and in Luke we return to Nain where we witness the resurrection of the nameless "young man." (Luke 7:14) Matthew says that a whole bunch of unnamed "holy people" were resurrected during the crucifixion (Matt. 27:52-53).

Likewise, in Matthew, Jesus tells the messengers to go back and tell John the Baptist that the raising of the dead was something that has been happening on a regular basis even though there's no written record of it up to that point. (Matt. 11: 2-6) And the book of Acts tells us that after the first Easter there was the resurrection of Tabitha/Dorcas (Acts 9:36-42) and the resurrection of Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12).

Then there's the "so what" factor. Even if it did happen, just as it says in the Bible, even if it is a historical fact, so what? What difference does it make for us?

If all these other resurrections have happened, what makes this resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth so special? It is this. Jesus is the only person to have died and been raised, never to die again. It's not just Jesus' resurrection, it's ours as well. Jesus showed us that resurrection from death isn't just an interesting phenomenon that happened one time a long time ago. And it isn't just something that happens at the end of our lives.

Resurrection is not something that happens only in response to physical death. It is a possibility that is open to us for all the smaller, symbolic deaths we suffer throughout our lives. Failure, humiliation, ridicule, grief, and loss can all kill our creativity, our hope, our dreams, and our self-esteem. The culture we live in is ready, at a moment's notice, to pounce on our enthusiasm, our positivity, our aspirations, and our dreams; to call us naïve, wide-eyed, gullible, and ingenuous.

Is it possible to reverse death? Is it possible that death is not final?

Easter offers us hope. We can rise from the grave of cynicism, despair, and hopelessness that the world insists on digging for us. We can rise and live again.

The empty tomb is, itself, a sign of life. That it once harbored death but now is empty is the telltale clue! New life has been here! Something new has broken into our world. When Jesus rose from the dead, it signaled the beginning of a new creation, a new world. It signaled the ultimate defeat of death itself and, with it, the sin that caused it in the first place. The kingdom of God is not a distant world but the reality of what happens when heaven and earth come together, renewing both -- the reality we pray for in the Lord's Prayer.

Because the Good Friday nightmare was transformed into the Easter

Dream, the way has been opened for ending all nightmares and incarnating all dreams. The Resurrection means that Christians can expectantly:

- dream of plenty in the midst of poverty;
- dream of compassion in the midst of poverty;
- dream of justice in the midst of inequity;
- dream of holiness in the midst of hell;
- dream of love in the midst of hate.

The resurrection offers the hope of a victory and a future made possible by God's grace.

If Jesus Christ has not been raised from the tomb, then the enemies of Christ win. Rome wins. There is no hope for the world - we are doomed to wars without ceasing and injustice without end. Only the strong shall survive, and the meek shall never inherit the earth. If Jesus Christ has not been raised from the tomb, there is no morality worth believing in, and history belongs to the forces of darkness.

If Jesus Christ has not been raised from the tomb, says Paul, then all your faith is in vain. Your faith is shallow and empty, for what else can you believe in but Jesus Christ?

Can you believe for one minute that human goodness, or scientific progress, or better education will set this world right? Can you believe in political morality, or national honor, or the ethics of the marketplace? Can these things save us?

To believe in something is to trust in something, and what else can you trust and believe but the Savior, Jesus Christ: crucified, dead, and buried, and on the third day raised up again?

And finally, if Jesus Christ was not raised from the tomb, all your living is in vain. You have nothing to live for, and nothing to hope for after you die. Paul says that if Christ was not raised, there is no resurrection for anyone. There is no eternal life, and thus, there is no meaning in this life. Everything that is, begins and ends with what you see here and now. Everything that matters is before your eyes. After that, there is nothing without the empty tomb.

But because of that empty tomb and Jesus' victory over death, we can sing:

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
 Because He lives, all fear is gone.
 Because I know He holds the future.
 And life is worth the living just
 because He lives.
 (Gloria, William Gaither)

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!