

## “WHY ARE YOU WEEPING?”

Luke 24:1-12 and John 20:1-18 April 21, 2019

### EASTER SUNDAY

My Goodness, what have we done with Easter? It's enough to make a person weep.

The highest, holiest day of the Christian year and, let's be honest, it consistently plays second fiddle to Christmas in not just the popular culture but, okay, in the church as well.

Do a Google search for “Easter images” and you'll find ten pictures of bunnies, baby chicks, and brightly colored eggs for every one picture of an empty tomb.

Why are we weeping? Because, to paraphrase Mary, they have taken my Lord and hidden him in an overwhelming mixture of baby chicks, tiny bunnies, egg hunts, pancake breakfasts, sunrise concerts, Peeps, jelly beans and chocolate, chocolate, chocolate. Empty tomb? Sorry, no one is really all that interested. Our fascination bends more toward baskets full of pink, plastic grass and hollow chocolate bunnies than toward tombs left mysteriously bereft of bodies.

The culture and, often, even the church, doesn't quite know what to do with this he-is-risen, this empty-tomb business. Deep down inside us, where our 21<sup>st</sup> century intellect lives, we are just a little bit relieved and more than a little justified to hear Luke tell us that even for the disciples, the central proclamation of Easter “seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe it.”

It is, after all, shockingly absurd. It is appallingly illogical. It is scandalously improbable, dreadfully implausible, and just down right, plain ol' impossible.

And that, brothers and sisters, is why we continue, in spite of all the noise and objections, to proclaim it as though our lives depended upon it.

Praise the Lord, Christ is Risen! He is Risen, Indeed!

This morning, the lectionary brings us two significantly different versions of the same events.

Luke's version is a short, lean account of Easter morning. It is disjointed and almost haphazard. He shows us some people going to the tomb. In

some translations these people are identified as the women with the spices from chapter 23. In others they are not so clearly identified. Whoever they are, they find the tomb empty, and they are confronted by two “men in dazzling clothes.”

It is not until this point that we find out that these people at the tomb are, in fact, women, when they fall to the ground in fear of the two men who then deliver a brief lecture about all the things Jesus had foretold and that they (the women, not the men in dazzling clothes) had forgotten.

When the lecture ends, the women run back into town where they relate what has happened at the grave to the eleven surviving disciples “and all the rest.” (There were, apparently, some other people who were present for all this but we are not told who they were.)

And, finally, now we are told who at least some of the women are, a detail that, normally would have been placed at the beginning of the story. And we are told that no one believed them. The ones to whom they relate their Easter morning experiences thought it was an “idle tale.” And Peter, just to make sure, runs to the tomb to check it out for himself. Finding the tomb empty, as the women had described, he does not go back and tell everyone as they did. Rather, he goes home probably to think about what he has seen.

Not satisfied to leave us with Luke’s brief, disjointed account, the lectionary committee supplements our understanding to the events of that long ago morning with John’s longer and more dramatic version. Here is a story that was written nearly 2000 years ago but could be easily adapted to a modern screenplay.

It begins with Mary Magdalene coming, alone, to the tomb. No group of unnamed women, just Mary. When she sees that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb opened, she runs to Peter’s house to tell him and John that the tomb has been broken into and the body stolen. The Fourth Gospel account relates how Peter and John run to the tomb in an almost comedic race which is won by John who arrives first but doesn’t enter the tomb. He peeks into it from outside but Peter charges right in and sees things as Mary had said, described to us in vivid detail. John joins him in the tomb and then they leave and go back home because they still haven’t put two and two together about this whole resurrection business.

The story doesn’t end there, however. The camera now pans around to the garden surrounding the tomb and to Mary who has been taking all this in and weeping. She bends to peek into the tomb and now there are the two men from

Luke's version of the story. But instead of lecturing her, they ask her one, simple question. "Why are you weeping?"

Assuming that this is more than a rhetorical question she answers simply and honestly. Someone has taken the body of her Lord and she doesn't know where they have put it. Almost before she can finish this sentence, however, she senses a presence near her and she turns to see another man. It's Jesus but, for some reason, she doesn't recognize him.

He asks her the same question that the two men in the tomb asked her: "Why are you weeping?" She takes him to be the gardener and says that, if he has taken away the body of Jesus she would appreciate it if he told her where it was so she could get it and remove it to a safer place. Jesus reveals himself to her by simply saying her name: "Mary."

Now she recognizes him and, no doubt, desires to embrace him, to give him a hug, to fall into his arms. We can imagine the emotions she's feeling now--- surprise, doubt, acceptance, relief, joy, love... He stops her, however, saying that she should not "hold onto me" because he is "ascending to the Father." Whatever he meant by this, he instructs her to go to the disciples and tell them what has happened and what he has said, which she does.

When we hear about the disciples dismissing the women's Easter proclamation as "an idle tale," we might easily substitute the word "hoax." It is a word that is, after all, much in the news of late.

In the spring of 2011, six-year-old Timmothy Pitzen disappeared. His mother, Amy Fry-Pitzen, took him out of an elementary school in Aurora, Illinois, and drove him to Wisconsin, where they were last seen together at a water park. Ms. Fry-Pitzen's body was found soon after in a motel room in Rockford, Ill., after an apparent suicide. She left a note saying that her son was in safe hands with someone who loved him and that "You will never find him." A massive, years long search, wide distribution of posters showing Timmothy's photo, and urgent pleas from his father and other relatives failed to locate Timmothy.

Then, last week, seven years after he disappeared, a disheveled, bruised young man stumbled up to some strangers in Newport, Kentucky, told them he was Timmothy Pitzen and asked them for help. He related a story of how he had been abducted and sexually abused for all those years and how he had escaped in Cincinnati and walked across the bridge to Newport. The local news media went

into breathless hyperdrive, abandoning all news but this story. Half-hour long special broadcasts re-told the original story and reporters interviewed family members in Illinois who related their hope that this really was Timmothy.

It didn't take long, however, to discover that he wasn't Timmothy at all. For one, he was too old to be Timmothy who would be only about 14 years old now. Also, he refused to give his fingerprints, His ear lobes were attached where Timmothy's were detached, a hereditary detail that does not change over time. Finally, the FBI managed to get a sample of his DNA and have it tested and compared to Timmothy's.

He was, in fact, Brian Rini, a mentally ill, 23-year-old man who, like many mentally ill people in the United States, had been in and out of jail and prison since he was a teenager. Now he has been arrested again, this time for lying to the FBI and other crimes that will, probably, send him back to prison. The local news media, who couldn't get enough of the story and gobbled it up uncritically when it first broke, are now all too eager to vilify the 23-year-old man for perpetrating this "cruel hoax" on the family of Timmothy, who is yet to be found.

Unlike Brian Rini, Jussie Smollett is, as far as we know, perfectly sane. He's just, according to the Chicago police, greedy.

Smollett, you may recall, is the gay, African American actor who said that he was attacked by two white men outside a Subway restaurant as he was walking home, alone, after dark. According to his story, they beat him, poured a caustic chemical (later determined to be household bleach) on him, and tied a noose around his neck, all the time shout racist and homophobic insults and phrases associate with the Donald Trump for President campaign.

It didn't take police long to figure out that this story was just too perfect to be true. It was, they say, a hoax, arranged, orchestrated, directed and perpetrated by Smollett himself. The two men he hired to help him with the fake attack had been captured on a security camera, as they relaxed on a sidewalk bench prior to the alleged attack. When picked up for questioning they immediately gave up Smollett and allowed that he had paid them with a check, which they produced as evidence.

Even though he was charged with several crimes including making a false report to police, the prosecuting attorney later dismissed all charges saying that Smollett had suffered enough for his misdeeds. The Chicago police depart-

ment disagrees and wants Smollett to pay for the expenses of investigating his claims of being abducted and attacked. Things are currently in litigation.

So how do we tell a real hoax from a fake one? How do we know if the stories in the news and in our Bible and Sunday School curriculum are true accounts or “idle tales?” Today’s readings would point us toward experience as a reliable rule for measuring truth.

Why are you weeping? The question is repeated twice and we know, from study and experience, that when anything is repeated in scripture, especially in the gospels it bears closer examination than we might otherwise have given it.

So, why are you weeping?

A colleague says that the Easter morning worship service should always begin with weeping, just before dawn, in utter darkness. It should begin as a somber, even a sad occasion. Jesus, remember, has been killed, tortured to death and those who loved him have been prevented, by tradition, from lovingly preparing his body for burial.

Why are you weeping? Indeed, why wouldn’t you be weeping at such a time as this? And if all that wasn’t bad enough, now we discover that the body of our beloved friend and teacher has been stolen from his grave. Dear God, is there no indignity that this wonderful man, your son, must not endure? Please, for mercy’s sake, let it end. For him. For us. Let us anoint his body and lay him to rest.

No wonder skeptics claim that the resurrection of Jesus is a hoax. The only logical explanation for it they say, is that it is either a fable or a myth. The debate over this topic creates fodder for fiction and non-fiction alike. No lesser best-selling authors than Robert Ludlum and Dan Brown have profited with fanciful plots that question the historic authenticity of the resurrection.

So, how do we, the Christian faithful, hold to the resurrection when it is being assailed on every side as a mistake at best or a fabrication at worst? Do we simply stand by the grave and weep?

We Methodists have a long tradition that we call the Wesley quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. We could do worse than to bring these four to bear on the question of the resurrection. Peter doesn’t need all four, however. One will do nicely, thank you. Let’s look at the texts.

How does Peter test the assertion that Jesus has risen from the grave? He goes and looks for himself. He tests the assertion by experience.

In Luke, he goes by himself. In John he goes with “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” but in each case he goes. He does not sit in his living room or in the local coffee shop and debate the resurrection as a matter of intellectual inquiry, he goes to experience it himself to see if it is real or fake.

In Acts, Luke speaks of witnesses who actually saw the risen Christ and ate and drank with him. They don’t sit around the dinner table and reminisce about their time together with him, they experience him in the here and now, in the breaking of bread.

In John’s gospel Peter and John see the evidence in the tomb and leave but Mary actually hangs around and sees not just the stuff that was left after the resurrection but the resurrected himself. She sees Jesus and talks with him and, had he not stopped her, she would have embraced him.

In the modern church we are not content to speak of Jesus’ resurrection in the past tense. We do not say, “Praise the Lord, Christ was risen,” do we? No, we say, “Praise the Lord, Christ IS risen.” It is not simply a historic event. For us, it is a contemporary reality that exists in our own lives. When we see the “wolf” and the “lamb” feeding together, when we watch the “lion” eating “straw” like the “ox”, when we experience the “serpent” being “cast out with nothing to eat but dust,” then we will know that Christ is risen.

Resurrection is happening all around us. God is creating hew heavens and new earth. The old things are being forgotten even as we speak; they hardly even come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever in what our God is Creating!!

Stop weeping! Strike up the band!! It’s time to dance in the streets to a rousing version of “When the Saints go Marching In,” because Christ is risen, Christ is risen, and Christ will ever be risen.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.