

“God Moves...Out of the Tomb”

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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church

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Luke 24: 1–12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The 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. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But 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.

Last week, at breakfast, my friend reached eagerly for the coffee. She said that she had stayed up until after midnight, finishing one of the best novels she had ever read. (I failed to write down the name of it.) It struck me that that is how many people I know approach this most magical of days. Easter, for many, is the climactic epilogue of the life of Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth, the miracle worker, the great teacher, who drew crowds and fed multitudes and touched lepers – and at the end of his amazing career, moving from unknown peasant, carpenter’s son, to challenging Roman power – and then, in the high ending of the story, the tomb is empty, Jesus is risen! Story over. Ahh! A satisfying ending to a great story. Now we can turn off the bedside lamp, fold our reading glasses, and go to sleep.

This is the nostalgic approach to the empty tomb. It is the final work of God in the life of Jesus and we celebrate it once a year, like we celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence each July 4. That is, we commemorate something that happened in the past.

Some others here, I know, just don’t think it happened at all. Some of you were drug here to church before going to lunch with the family. And, you are willing to dress up and indulge what you consider to be a great fable and tradition. You just don’t believe that a man actually died and is now alive. Some of you, most likely see today as a great cultural holiday and tradition, with hats and eggs and bunnies, but not really sure this wild resurrection story has any relevance or is even true.

I understand. In fact, even the disciples did not believe it either. Think about that. The guys who walked with Jesus, saw the miracles, cleaned up the baskets full of leftover bread and fish, watched a

lame man dance – even they did not believe the resurrection. A dead man who lives again is just too far for them to go.

Our scripture today tells us that when the disciples first heard the news that the tomb was empty, they took it to be “*an idle tale*”. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and some other women who told them, and, in spite of this many witnesses, they just didn’t buy it – a dead man who has been risen from the dead - “*an idle tale*” they said. The first preachers of the resurrection might have been discounted because they were women? Who knows – but interestingly, many in the Christian Church still don’t believe women should be preachers in spite of the fact that they were the first ones entrusted to preach the resurrection story that would save the world?

The women had gone that morning to take ritual spices to prepare the body of Jesus, when they found the huge stone covering rolled away and the tomb empty – which is hard to make sense of because the thing is huge. Besides, who tampers with a tomb? And according the Luke, two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them and asked, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.*”

The reason I say, “*according to Luke*”, is that not all of the gospels tell the story exactly the same way. Not only do they not agree about how many dazzling angels were present, but they don’t all agree on:

- the number of women who were there,
- the timing of the tomb opening,
- or the appearance or absence of Jesus.

Some skeptics point to these discrepancies as evidence that it didn’t happen. My response is exactly opposite; I think the variations strengthen the story. For one, a tidy story, that emerges exactly the same from within several Christian communities is just not likely. If every account were exactly alike, it would look like they huddled to make sure their stories matched. Instead, they trusted a plural variety of witnesses, some variations in detail – besides, who experiences or records the exceptional in exactly the same way?

For example - I have done this exercise a few times in Sunday School classes with Senior Adults. I have asked them to write a narrative about the assassination of President Kennedy. All seniors know where they were when it happened. I asked them to include as many details as possible and write a three-paragraph essay. Then, we would go around and read the accounts. They all told the story differently. Some would tell the story in first person, telling where they were, what they were doing, how they responded. Others would tell it almost like they were a newspaper reporter – “*On November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, President Kennedy was riding in a presidential motorcade...*” Details were interesting.

Sometimes women in the class, never men, but sometimes women would report what Jacqueline Kennedy was wearing. (A pink Chanel suit.) And, interestingly, some men, never women but some men would register what the make was of the limo. I had two guys in Warrenton, NC almost get into a shouting match over whether the car was a Lincoln, or a Cadillac and it was before smart phones so we couldn't check. (It was a Lincoln). Keep in mind, these people in Sunday School had seen the footage of that horrible day, dozens of times and their accounts still varied. Does the variation of their accounts mean that the assassination of President Kennedy did not happen? Of course not. And, the biblical witness declares the central detail in one, unwavering voice – the tomb is empty, he is risen!

The Gospels have been called, "*Passion narratives with extended introductions.*" That is, about half of the gospels is about one week in the life of Jesus. Passion Week, Holy Week, takes up half of the story because the story is building to the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is the most life-altering event in human history. Then, the rest of the New Testament is bearing witness to how life is transformed and lived more fully, more lovingly because of Jesus. Every chapter of the biblical witness is facing Jerusalem. Every telling of the Jesus story has the soundtrack of the resurrection playing in the background. He is Risen! And it has recalibrated the history of the world.

And from that day forward, people have been telling the story that has changed the course of human history and changed the lives of many of you in this room – passing the story from generation to generation. The women told the disciples, who doubted at first, but when the resurrection became real for them, they told others about the size of God's love and it transformed one individual life at a time, passing across the generations by story-tellers who have born witness to God's victory over death and the way it has made a difference in their dead lives. The good news is not a spectator sport – it invigorates transformed people to tell it again.

For many of you, this is not a cute fable, or even the exciting ending to the Jesus story, for many in this room, the truth of the resurrection is what enlivens your everyday.

- The risen Christ gives your life purpose and drives you toward the most loving version of yourself.
- The empty tomb means that ultimate questions are answered, fear is diminished, and life eternal has begun today.
- The resurrection changes the way you eat your cereal. All of life is animated by the love of God in Christ, all fear is gone, all people are beloved, all truth is respected.
- We bend our lives to the call of God in Christ, like trees grow toward the sunlight, because we know there is a life-giving quality to growing in that direction. For the believer, the victory of the resurrection changes everything.

But still, our public response to the good news differs. As we have already said, when the women encountered the resurrection, when the risen Christ became real to them, they took off to tell people. When they realized all of the implications – that the power of God makes dead things come to life, they could not keep that news to themselves. And, even though the first to hear were skeptical – “*an idle tale*” – as the disciples said - the women kept telling the story because some news is too good to keep.

But our scripture for today says that one of the disciples, Peter, was curious enough to go check things out for himself. He ran to the tomb, stopped, peeked in, and all he saw was a pile of linen burial clothes and he went home amazed. So, apparently, at first Peter had an Easter story - told to him, that did not yet have a personal encounter. There are people who come to church, sing the hymns, peek into the empty tomb and go home amazed, but have not yet seen what the resurrection means for them.

We know, of course, the resurrection does become personal for Peter and that he eventually joins the women as an early preacher of the power of the resurrection. In his first sermon, recorded in the first chapter of Acts, he concludes by saying, “*Beginning from the baptism of John, to that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.*”¹ From that day until now, when lives are changed by the empty tomb, they are ordained a witness. That is our vocation as a Christ follower. You and I are called upon to do more than be amazed at the pile of empty burial clothes. We are called to be a witness to the love of God and the transforming power of resurrection.

Let me be clearer about what being a witness means. It does not mean that you should get a handful of Christian tracts and stop people at the Marta station and ask, “*If you died tonight...?*” As Anne Lamott once said, “*You don’t always have to chop with the sword of truth, you can point with it too.*”² A witness is someone who tells or writes about what he or she has experienced. That’s all.

In April of 2012, I witnessed a perfect game in baseball. In 140 years of Major League Baseball history and more than 210,000 games played, only 23 perfect games have ever been pitched. I was there, in Seattle, when Phillip Humber of the Chicago White Sox threw only 96 pitches to pitch a perfect game against the Seattle Mariners. I hope you will ask me about it. I don’t assault people sitting next to me on the airplane, but if the topic turns anywhere close to great sporting events you have attended – then hold on, because I’m going to bear witness. And I get animated telling the story. I’m just a witness.

Ask me about a friend of mine who was extraordinarily wealthy and lost it all. He was sleeping on a mattress in an otherwise empty house because his love of drinking had more power over him than any other love in his life. God’s love found him. The power of the risen Christ became real to him when he was somewhere near the bottom. He rebuilt his financial success, but more importantly, he found practical, everyday ways that the power of an empty tomb, God’s power over death, could translate to his power over what was killing him. The resurrected Jesus saved him, and I saw it. Now, I tell that story. I

¹ Acts 1:22 NRSV

² Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

bear witness to the power of the resurrection. Being a witness does not mean that you sign up to knock on doors on Saturday mornings; it simply means that you are eager to tell about what you have experienced.

And, part of our calling is to put ourselves and our families in the circle where the stories are told. We gather here each Sunday because this is where the resurrection story gets retold. We hear from witnesses. We read the story of the ancient witnesses who saw Jesus give sight to the blind, or who heard Peter preach at Pentecost. We hear new stories of repaired relationships and poor children being tutored, and clean water wells being dug in Haiti, and other modern stories of God making dead things come alive again. Resurrection stories are told here all of the time. We come here to bear witness to the ways God is bringing new life and then we go from here to tell those stories to a world that is desperate to know that there is something bigger, stronger, more compelling than making this month's quota.

The women at the tomb came telling the good news of Jesus' resurrection and the retelling of that story, witness after witness, has carried the Christian story forward, for more than 2000 years, but don't take it for granted. Melody Muliak, our current deacon chair, and her husband Steve, recently got back from a trip to Amsterdam. Steve was on business and Melody tagged along but one afternoon when they were both free, they took a tour. The tour guide told them they would be going to the heart of the city to see two historic buildings, the church and City Hall. The historic church contained the tomb of William of Orange, the King of England in the late 17th century. Seeing the king's tomb might be of interest, but the guide explained that City Hall was important, not just for the building itself but that is where the business of the people takes place including weddings. He said that weddings don't take place at the church anymore because the Netherlands is not really a religious country anymore and well, the churches are now just historic buildings to them. That is what happens when people lose their vocation as witness – churches become historic buildings instead of incubators for the faith.

Most of you are here today, because at some point in your life, the risen Christ became real for you. It was not just a good ending to a good story, but you realized that life was fundamentally different and richer because he lives. For some in the room, this may be the occasion to reclaim your vocation as a witness. To recommit to being here, with your family, to hear the stories told, to have your faith sharpened, to be formed as a witness to the love of God in Christ.

Others of you may have never experienced the empty tomb in a personal way, never been enveloped by the forgiveness and grace of God and you would like to know more about what it means to follow this path to life.

Still others might have decided that this is the day to join your life's mission with the mission of Second - Ponce de Leon Baptist Church. Today might be the day to join this church and declare your commitment to become a witness to Christ's love with us. However you feel led to respond, please do so as we stand and sing.