

“The Easter Story ~ In Cross Section”

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April 21, 2019

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.

In the pre-dawn stillness, a handful of women walk through the city gate and begin their journey to the place of death. In the quiet of that Sunday morning, they carry burial aromatics they’ve prepared for anointing Jesus’ body. In the darkness, they make their way to a place of shattered dreams.

They had followed Joseph of Arimathea, two evenings ago, to learn in which tomb he would lay Jesus’ body. It was nearly sabbath, but they were able to prepare spices before the sun set. Through the next day, the women waited. Then, when the gates opened Sunday morning, they set off to honor their dead friend. To show proper respect for the dead – this is all they could do.

Maybe we would have done similarly. Maybe we have.

Now is the time for the women to make their last goodbyes and to recall Jesus’ teachings, his compassion and healing, his demand that people live into God’s intention. Now is the time to hallow his memory.

Today, we consider the Easter story in four slices, as it were. In the first, a handful of women walk to the tomb where Jesus’ body had been laid. They expect nothing out of the ordinary. The extraordinary has already happened – when he was betrayed, arrested and

executed. There is nothing left now but to prepare his body ... and to ensure that the memory of his ministry is preserved.

At least this is what they believe. But the morning turns, unexpectedly.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? ... He has been raised.”

Raised? The women pause, stunned. Skeptical. What they hear is at odds with what they know. Jesus is dead. They saw him die.

Notice that these women do not meet Christ himself. They meet messengers who tell them that Christ is risen. What they receive is only a word. A message.

Their experience that first Easter morning is somewhat like to our own experience of the risen Christ. We too have only words. Our belief in God’s resurrection action hinges on the reports of men who have been dead for 2000 years.

Why would God take this course of action? Wouldn’t it be better, easier, if the women had arrived just in time to watch Jesus walk out of the tomb? And easier for us to believe if Jesus showed up here on Easter morning in all his glory.

Instead, like these women on that long-ago Sunday morning, we are given a message of resurrection, one that goes against everything we know to be true.

The messengers’ words along with the discovery of the empty tomb leave the women confused at first. And alarmed. It doesn’t make sense. Disbelief is the logical response.

When [the women] returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and all the others. ... Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn’t believe the women.

Experience has taught us that death is the end, yet here we are told that Christ lives. When contradictory claims collide, people tend to keep on affirming what we already know – about religion, politics, climate change, the people around us. It takes time – or convincing evidence – to turn us from even false knowledge to new understanding.

But Jesus had talked to them weeks ago about the events of the last few days, Being reminded of this and trusting Jesus implicitly, the women accept this new truth. Renewed and inspired, they bring the news to the men who call it "an idle tale.”

A word about unbelief... Unbelief does not mean that a person believes nothing. They simply believe something else. People say "I don't believe it" because there’s something they believe more.

Belief is not easy. Easter challenges our certainties about life and death. We know that everyone dies eventually. The Easter message asks us, "Are you quite certain?"

... They didn't believe the women. But Peter ran to the tomb. When he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home, wondering what had happened.

The Easter message calls us from our old belief in death to a new belief in life. The male disciples are sure it's nonsense. Yet the message is enough to propel Peter out the door to go see for himself.

We follow in Peter's footsteps. We hear the rumor that Christ is alive and we wonder, "What if it's true? What if death is not final?"

Believing takes courage. Not believing takes courage. Either is okay, because believing is about more than saying "yes" to an implausible claim of a man dead returned to life. Believing is also about saying "no" to the little deaths that are a part of this life. It's saying that, in the face of all that's evil in the world and all the bad experiences, God is the sustaining power which brings life out of death and reconciliation out of conflict. Believing is accepting God's invitation for new life. And it's practicing resurrection ourselves through our own acts of love and reconciliation.

If you are skeptical, it's all right to tell God how outrageous it is to expect you to believe that Christ has been raised. God has heard it before. It's okay, so go ahead.

But after you tell God what you don't believe, take a long look at your life. Look at the relationships that beg for reconciliation. Face the shadow places that need to be reclaimed. Notice the absence of hope you feel when you consider the state of the world.

Resurrection is that which quietly slips, or crashes abruptly, into our lives and – if we let it – turns all that we think we know upside down – remedying hopelessness with new hope, lending courage to mend relationships, shining light and options into our difficult situations. Then we say to ourselves, if this is resurrection, I need it!

God wants wholeness for you – wholeness in heart, mind and being; wholeness in your relationships, God wants you to know new life. Will you accept it?

Easter marks the beginning of a new creation. It starts with Christ's resurrection, but does not end there. God – in love – is always about resurrection. God's resurrecting activity continues wherever God's message of love and grace are lived out.

With Easter, God validates all that Jesus did and said and taught in his earthly ministry – about love and acceptance, forgiveness and justice.

The news of the day might leave us wondering if this world is headed for destruction – through violence, hatred and exploitation. As Easter people, as Christ followers, we are called to be in the business of serving, leading and praying so that God may effect new

life for all of creation. We are the ones empowered by God to seek out the least and the lost, offering comfort, restoration, and reconciliation. We, as God's Church, are the ones called to bring about God's realm in the here and now. This is our call. But it's up to us to accept it.

Every year, we tell the story of the empty tomb and unexpected, unbelievable encounters. Every year, we face the challenge of Easter: Do we live in belief beyond what we think we know? Do we persevere through the shadows of our lives and of the world? Every year, we decide if we will let God transform our lives. Yet this isn't simply an annual thing. Each day, we decide if we will let hope be stronger than despair and love stronger than death. Every day, we decide if we will set aside our own ways and step out into God's vision for our lives.

We cannot discount the world's shadow side. Evils are all too real and present. Losses are an unavoidable part of the fabric of our lives. Yet the Easter story affirms that God's resurrection activity has the power to break open dusty tombs and tear down walls. The power to transform the barrenness of empty lives into hope-filled hope and joy. Resurrection has the power to show death for what it is – the possibility for love to come again.

God is always in the business of resurrection. The Easter event marks a first of many hope-filled raisings. Our loving God is always active. Bringing restoration. God offers these resurrections again and again, willing us to be lifted out of our death-like experiences, and loving us into new life.

Turn your heart to meet the risen Christ. Let hope be stronger than fear. Accept that life is stronger than hate. And that God's love is stronger than death. Always.

This is what it means to be Easter people. This is resurrection.