

SLD04.08.07
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 24:1-12
Jill Oglesby Evans

“What’s It to You?”

Jesus Christ is risen today! What’s it *to* you? Or to me? Or, for that matter, to Jesus’ disciples that first Easter morning?

What’s evident from today’s text is that, at least to those early Christians, Jesus’ resurrection was something a whole lot different than all the confidence and joy we’ve been expressing here this morning.

To Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, that first Easter morning is a time of deep, deep sadness, of heartache and grief at the loss of their beloved one. And as is common in the face of untidy, untimely death, the women make ready to busy themselves with the task at hand; in their case, embalming Jesus’ dead body with the spices they’ve prepared.

But when they discover the tomb’s stone has been rolled away and there is no body to be found, the occasion of Easter shifts for them from sad...to tragic. As if it were not enough that their Jesus has been tortured and crucified, now even his remains have been torn from their ministrations. The women’s heartache that first Easter morning is unspeakable.

Suddenly, in that desperate, vulnerable moment, two men miraculously appear before the women, men in dazzling clothes, angels according to the Gospel of John, and the hearts of the women snap from devastation...to terror. All three collapse to the ground.

The angels speak, perhaps in a bid to bring the women back to themselves:

“Ladies, why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

Frozen in terror, the women do not respond.

Angels: “Hellooo. Jesus isn’t here, he’s risen!”

The women remain prostrate.

The angels look at each other and shrug; maybe the third time’s a charm.

“Okay, look, y’all. Remember how Jesus told you, while he was still in Galilee... (under their breath, like about 20,11 times) that he was going to be handed over to the authorities, and be crucified, and rise again on the third day? Remember that? Huh? Well...guess what!”

Tentatively, the women glance upward.

“Yeah, it happened! Just like he said. Jesus isn’t here, see, because this is a place for dead people and Jesus isn’t dead anymore. Get it? Jesus Christ is risen today!”

And finally, what Jesus said, and what Jesus did, and all that happened after that his crucifixion...and the empty tomb...and their broken hearts...and these happy, glowing guys...it all comes together for the women, and they finally *do* get it. And their hearts leap, and their feet leap, and they run on back to tell the others what they’ve finally understood – that Jesus Christ is risen today! Hallelujah!

Only...back at the Locked Door Inn, the other disciples... well, they’ve had a pretty rough three days, and they’re tired, and they’re scared, and they’re confused, and just generally feeling pretty miserable about their behavior here of late. You know, falling asleep on Jesus’ last night instead of praying with him, and then betraying him,

and then denying him, and then abandoning him. Plus, who knows what's even gonna happen to them now. The very last thing the downhearted disciples need right now is a trio of ecstatic females bursting through the doors with their bubbly news about...
...whatever.

All they know is that...regardless of what Jesus said before, or what the women are saying now, they saw with their own eyes that Jesus was abused and crucified and buried, so that's their story and they're stickin' to it. More than that is an idle tale.

If it took two angels three repetitions to push the women past their tale of tragedy, something more than a one-time announcement from a gaggle of gigglers is required to get a grin out of the grim disciples.

Okay, Peter, if you don't believe us, go look for yourself!

And so, if for no other reason than to clear the tension in the room and get the women off their backs, Peter runs to the tomb, stoops over, looks in, and sees for himself what is there. Nothing. The tomb is empty. And what Jesus said, and what Jesus did, and what happened after that, his crucifixion...and the empty tomb...and the glowing guys...and the jubilant women, well, it all comes together for Peter, and he finally gets it. And he is amazed.

And here, in just twelve verses of Luke's post-resurrection text, is the whole spectrum of reactions to Jesus' resurrection, not of people outside the faith – after all, we don't expect secular humanists, agnostic scientists, persons of other faiths, or the great, unwashed indifferent to get overly exercised about the Good News of Easter morning – no, Luke's text reveals a whole landscape of resurrection responses of people of *faith*, of earnest and devoted disciples of Jesus.

Sadness, fear, confusion, awe, indifference. Sound familiar? What about you or me. Where do we locate *ourselves* in the story? This morning, and this season, we proclaim with confidence that Christ is risen! But what *is* Jesus' resurrection to you and me, really.

Do our hearts leap before the empty tomb, or are we secretly just as confused as the women about what really happened? When we face a closed casket, are we so confident the vault will soon be empty, or are we really wondering whatever's become of God? In the presence of the risen Jesus, are we empowered to look for, no, *demand*, new life from our own life? Or do we still count ourselves among the dutiful, going about the business of embalming?

In short, how has the Good News of Jesus' resurrection gripped us, or has it gripped us at all?

Whatever your answer, according to Luke's story, you're likely in good...and faithful... company. For not only do the disciples' reactions to Jesus' resurrection vary all over the board, so do the resurrection accounts of the four gospels. As if the particulars of the event, or even one's reaction to it, are not nearly so important as experiencing some sort of intimate engagement with it. Wherever a disciple may be along the path to Easter understanding, the "believability" of, even the doctrine around, Jesus' resurrection, is far less important than whether a disciple genuinely grapples with it at all.

Whether or not Jesus' resurrection can be documented, reproduced or understood, what would it mean to you if it *were* true? What does it say to you about God, about death, about life? What possibilities does it reveal, what truth, what hope,

what challenge, does it carry? However untidy and fundamentally ungraspable¹ the various empty tomb narratives, anyone wishing to follow Jesus is beckoned to follow him to the tomb in order to lean over and peer into its darkness, and grapple with what you find.

And what *would* you expect to find in the tomb? What do you *wish* you'd find? Or, for that matter, what *do* you find? And how do you explain what you've found? Or is there some stone in your life that's gotta be rolled away, some dark place, opened up and aired out, before you can even see in?

Or are you even willing to look?

Perhaps you're one of us who, while you appreciate the aesthetics of Easter morning - the flowered cross, the special music, all this upbeat energy and positive "group-think," don't really expect tomorrow to be different than any other Monday.

Never mind how the secular humanists and ChrEasters relate to Jesus' resurrection, what is it to you and me? Really.

The other day I came across an article in the *New York Times Magazine* about why we humans believe what we believe, or, how evolutionary science explains faith in God.² The central question of the article is whether belief itself is a helpful adaptation that somehow enhances an organism's chance of survival, or whether belief is merely an evolutionary accident.

Rich with varied and contradictory theories, the article was more complex than I could even grasp, never mind convey in this sermon. But one particular concept struck me as relevant, related to the word, "spandrel," a term coined by two high-profile

¹ Wall Street Journal, "Beliefs," Peter Steinfels, Saturday, April 19, 2003.

² The New York Times Magazine, "Darwin's God," Robin Marantz Henig, March 4, 2007, Section 6.

evolutionary biologists at Harvard to refer to “a trait that has no adaptive value of its own.”³

The word “spandrel” is borrowed from architecture where it originally referred to the V-shaped structure formed between two rounded arches. That V-shaped place between two arches is not there for any purpose; it just happens when you put two arches together. Now a spandrel can be made decorative or functional, but basically it’s an unintended byproduct unrelated to the real purpose of the design.

One of the theories explored by the article is the possibility that God, or rather, belief in God, is itself a spandrel of some other, more survival-oriented, psychological tool of the human mind. (They can say things like that in *The New York Times Magazine*.) Well, I won’t go so far as to suggest that God’s a “spandrel,” but I wonder sometimes if some of our beliefs *about* God might not be inching that direction. I find myself wanting to press the question among us “faithful” as to how much Easter’s proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ might itself have become something of a “spandrel” – a sort of tolerated, decorative, but unintended byproduct of our personal investment in this group of folks of whom we are so fond but who ask so much of us.

In the business of church life, I find it is easy to forget why we are here. Why we’re a community, a family, of faith. Why we volunteer our time and resources to keep our doors open and our staff functioning and our buildings attractive and our programs supported and our mission growing and this body of Christ breathing. Amidst all the complex demands of our lives, it can easy to forget why we keep going to the trouble of staying in touch with one another, and reaching out to others, and thinking, thinking,

³ Ibid, p. 40.

thinking, all the time, of how God might be calling us to expand our relationships and our mission.

I mean, sure, Jesus was a good man and all, the very model of righteousness whom humanity kills because “good” people annoy and prophets threaten. And, we all know the Apostle Paul got a little carried away with organizing and spreading the Word. And then the State got involved and bricks and mortar became the name of the game. And then the State got less involved but we still have all this bricks and mortar to take care of. So in addition to trying to understand what the heck Jesus was talking about in the first place, and whatever good works and relationships we can sustain, we add the focus and pressure of filling the pews. This, of course, in the spare time remaining after making a living, building a life, raising families and so forth. Until, in the density and intensity and fear and suffering and hope and dreams of our elaborate lives, you can see, can’t you, how Jesus’ resurrection might become something of a spandrel in the complex scheme of things? Decorative, certainly, of an Easter morning; and functional, perhaps, during the season, but generally a byproduct of the whole secular Christian culture, an implausible trait with no particular adaptive value of its own?

Dare we admit such a thing on Easter morning, before all these visitors who might imagine that we’re as confident and grounded in our faith all year ‘round as we appear to be today? Well, sure. Jesus’ disciples have always had a heck of a time with his resurrection, and not just on Easter morning, either. Even those who witnessed Jesus’ life and endured his death thought the news of his resurrection was an idle tale, and they did not believe it. (Jn 24:11)

Yet God doesn't seem to tire of sending angels and empty tombs, images and insights, experiences and revelations, to help us who follow Jesus, if not to understand his resurrection, at least to grapple with its truth.

Some of you have read, and many of you will have heard of, the fascinating tale of the life of Piscine Molitor,⁴ otherwise known as "Pi." The way Pi tells it, he survived a shipwreck and 227 days on the open sea all alone except for the company of a monumental (and very hungry) Bengal tiger. When Pi's interrogators are unconvinced that his story is true, he proceeds to tell it a different way, without the tiger and other animals.

Says Pi to his skeptical listeners, "You cannot prove which story is true and which is not. ...So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you cannot prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? The story with the animals or the story without the animals?"

"Oh, no question," his interrogators agree. "The story with the animals is the better story."

"Thank you," says Pi. "And so it goes with God."

The proclamation of the faithful this morning is that Jesus Christ is risen today! And who knows but that one day what Jesus said and what he did and what happened after that - his crucifixion and the empty tomb and the glowing angels and the jubilant women, will all come together for you and me the way it finally did for Peter and the other disciples. Maybe for some of you, it already has.

Or maybe it won't be a narrative about *Jesus'* empty tomb, but some other in which you've laid someone you love, or in which you've lain in yourself. And one day

⁴ The Life of Pi, Yann Martel, Harcourt, Inc., Orlando, Fla. 2001. p. 317.

you peer down into that closed, dark place, and what do you know but the stone's rolled back and it's empty inside....

After all, which is the better story? The one with the resurrection or the one without the resurrection?

Well, so it goes with God.

To the glory of God. Amen.

With which image of our Savior do you more comfortably relate: the suffering, cross-bound, death-doomed Jesus, or the death-freed, fish-eating prankster who keeps flashing in and out of the disciples' dining room?