

Idle Tale? Miracle? More?

Isaiah 65: 17-25 Luke 24: 1-12

It was very early in the morning, still dark. The women were up and had been up for an hour or more. The men were asleep. Peter was sleeping fitfully as fears of a sudden appearance by the Temple guard to take him away kept churning through his thoughts.

Mary gives him a shake, and he jumps like a rabbit. She tells him that the women are going to the tomb. “Huh? What? The tomb? Oh, the tomb.” As the mental cobwebs start to clear, he moves from fear reaction to security strategy. ‘Remember to make sure no one follows you, coming or going, okay?’ She gives him that look that says, “Duh.”

While the women head off to the tomb, we can imagine that Peter can’t get back to sleep. The thought of the Temple guard suddenly bursting through the door won’t stop running through his head. Fortunately, before they left, the women put on the Mr. Coffee for the men, and now the smell was *awesome*.

We know the women’s story: how they get to the tomb, the stone is somehow rolled away – no small feat in itself – *and there’s no* body of Jesus inside. Two angels put in an appearance to ask: *Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen!* It all comes back to them now, how Jesus had taught them about what would happen.

They rush back to where the disciples were hiding out. While we only remember three in the Luke account, *Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, mother of James*, Luke also adds the words: *and the others with them* which echoes what Mark had in his gospel account. Then figure that we have at least five women who went to the tomb, had this experience, figure it out, and return to tell the disciples. At least five women.

When they return and (we can imagine) excitedly make their report to the men, what does it say happened? *They did not believe the women because their words seemed like nonsense*. That’s rather harsh. The New Revised Standard Version is a bit different, that their words seemed like *an idle tale*.

We can imagine the men scoffing and mocking the women and their account of the stone rolled away, an empty tomb, the appearance of angels, and their message, *He is risen!* “Yeah, right!” “Have you lost your minds?” “What garbage!”

But amid the scoffing and hooting and laughter, something awakened in Peter. Having been obsessed with security concerns and trying to stay one step ahead of the powers-that-be, Peter had not taken any time to reflect on Jesus’ teachings together with the events that had unfolded. As one of the women mentioned, ‘Remember how he told us,’ Peter’s memory kicks into high gear and the connections start to sizzle in his mind. He springs up and runs to the tomb with his mind running as fast it can, just like his legs, trying to make sense of all this new information.

Linen strips, that would have wrapped the body, lie on the bier inside the tomb, and there is no corpse. The text says, *He went away, wondering to himself what had happened.*

Peter departs from the place, trying to come to terms with this empty tomb. Is it an idle tale that the women have spun? Is it some miraculous event? And if so, what does it mean? Peter is wrestling with this turn of events, struggling to make sense of things, *if* “sense” is even supposed to be made of this.

What does this Easter morning mean? That’s the question that draws us together every spring: what **does** this mean: Easter, resurrection, new life out of death?

The companion reading this morning comes from Isaiah 65 where the prophet relates a vision of God’s promise for God’s people. Let’s remember that the prophet is speaking to a people that had been enslaved and in exile in Babylon for several generations. They had been liberated and returned to their home land, the Promised Land of God. However, after a generation since returning, God’s people have discovered that being “back home” didn’t solve any problems. The old ways, the old traditions, the old institutions weren’t bringing back the glory days. Instead, they were mired in an ever-deepening sense of hopelessness and despair. Stale, sclerotic, and spiritless, it was like they were experiencing a slow death. In fact, problems had become so severe that there was a move underway for a religious revival which we hear about elsewhere in Ezra and Nehemiah. Third Isaiah is part of that era, and the prophet announces God’s new vision for life and society.

A new creation is to be undertaken by God, something so utterly different that *the former things will not be remembered*. All the myths and fables held so dearly about the Promised Land and about Jerusalem will be eclipsed by this new work of God, leaving the glorious past as a forgotten time. In this new time of God’s creation, God will return joy, prosperity, and long life to his people as they become *a people blessed by the Lord*. The exploitation of the people will end, people will thrive with long life, and their labors will be rewarded with blessings of prosperity. The holy city of Jerusalem will be a place of peace as *the wolf and the lamb will feed together* instead of one seeking to destroy and consume the other, the more common experience of God’s people.

God’s promise of a new creation, *new heavens and a new earth*, suggests a new relationship between God and his people that would transform their way of life. The promises are extravagant, but they are made by God.

But we need to notice something important. These promises aren’t focused on any otherworldly, transcendent experience. Yes, this is prophecy, a visioning of the future, but it is rooted in day-to-day experience. It is about prospering in this life, gaining reward for your labor in this life, being healthy and strong in this life. These are things that we might take for granted today, but which were in such short supply at the time of Third Isaiah. For them, it had become oppressive and the people despaired.

God declares that his people will experience liberation and new life once again. God will author new life out of the death sentence that they believe has imprisoned them.

But does this relate to Easter, to Jesus' resurrection? Surely the resurrection is about life after death, being saved from judgment, gaining the grace of God and a heavenly reward. There is one huge problem though. None of the gospels accounts have Jesus saying anything really about resurrection and heavenly reward or most of the rest. So how is it that our tradition has transferred the idea of the resurrection of Jesus into some heavenly reward and afterlife?

Frankly, even our notions of this afterlife are pretty scandalous in their speculations. People think the next life will be *better* than this life. Really? It's going to be better than sitting in your spacious house with its climate controlled environment, snuggled into a recliner, with popcorn and a beer, watching your favorite entertainment, remote control at the ready, until the pizza guy comes with your order. Heaven is going to be better than that? Really? Or is it just more of what we really like, and having it all the time? Then heaven is simply self-indulgence in the extreme. Jesus died so that we could be **self-indulgent for eternity**.

Maybe, just maybe, we missed something, screwed up something in this resurrection story. Did we forget about Palm Sunday, the ride into Jerusalem, the journey into the heart of the tradition of faith, the center of power, the challenge to the status quo, the almost certain arrest and persecution? John the Baptist never even marched into Jerusalem and, oh, man, they got him really good.

Did we forget the plotting against his life while he taught in the Temple? Did we forget his arrest in the middle of the night by the Temple guard? Did we forget his abuse and torture? Did we forget his rejection by the crowds, the masses? Did we forget Roman Governor Pilate's indifference that sentenced him to death? Did we forget the cross, the crucifixion, the ghastly hanging for hours upon hours until finally his shoulders collapse into his windpipe and he suffocates in a horrible death?

The back story lost amid the lilies and the egg hunts, the happy talk and alleluias, is that Jesus stood up with compassion as his motivation, with justice in his backbone, with love for the weak, poor, and vulnerable in his heart. His hands touched and healed and comforted the ones no one would go near, the outcast, condemned, and lost. With feet anchored in unbending courage, his voice spoke out and spoke up for the voiceless, coming at the powerful in ways that shook them to their core.

He was executed for sedition, for treason against the state, for invoking God and the power of faith in ways that were unacceptable to the religious elite and leadership. They had him arrested, and the Empire ended his campaign for justice and peace, for healing and grace, for love and compassion. Death would take him down and shut him up, and then everyone could go back to their recliner and their remote, their popcorn and beer, their very comfortable existence, because with Jesus the disrupter dead, we

can go back to the way things were when all was good for me and I was happy, and happily indifferent to things that were problematic for others.

The resurrection morning with the empty tomb is God's answer to the Empire; you can't kill the power of faith or the good news of the faithful Son. Resolute in faith in God and trusting in the promise of life, the servant of the Lord and his Kingdom has nothing to fear from the Empire or any other power on earth. There is resurrection power in faith in Jesus and his path.

The resurrection is God's word to faithful servants ministering for the Kingdom. God says you are free, liberated from fear, triumphant over death. You are empowered to be witnesses to new life, to be challengers of the powers, to stand for justice, grace, and peace, to embrace the sinful, lift up the poor and exploited, and demand love and compassion from a sinful world that treats people like garbage and disposes of them in the same way. You are empowered to serve the Kingdom **like Jesus**.

The resurrection is God's power waiting to happen in those who declare Jesus Lord and Savior. It isn't an individual salve for trivial faults that we think are "sins." It is your authorization to work, to take the road less traveled, the one that leads into threats, danger, and evil, and even to sacrifice yourself for the sake of the Kingdom.

There is only one problem, of course. No one wants that authority; no one wants to do that service – not even close. We like our Easter, our life after death, our heaven that consists of my butt in an eternal recliner and my hand on the remote for eternity.

But for a moment, just a moment, let's understand one thing: Jesus' resurrection was not so that you could go to heaven that's an extension of everything you like in this life. Just for a moment, let's imagine that the resurrection was actually something important, something that could change the world, something that would bring new heavens and earth as the prophet Isaiah described. Then we will understand why we sing, Alleluia! Praise the Lord! For the new life empowerment that we are given in *this* life that leads us into the eternal promise.