

“An Idle Tale?”

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... on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The 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. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But 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. (Luke 24:1-12)

It probably would not surprise any of you to hear that an Easter sermon is a particularly tough challenge for a preacher. And it is not just because this is the holiest, most important Sunday of the year... and it's not just because the story of the empty tomb is THE ultimate story, so we better get it right and we better bring our A-plus game. No, in my experience, the thing that makes an Easter sermon the biggest challenge of the year is that there are so many different reasons that you have to come to church on Easter.

Certainly, most of us come to hear once again that old, old story – the one that begins with great hope and a “triumphal entry,” but then begins to fall apart under the weight of betrayal and intrigue, then full-on collapses as heroes and friends fall away, and then literally dies on a hill on a Friday afternoon. But then, when all seems lost, that same story somehow pulls off a complete 180, makes a quick three-day run up to the mountaintop, and then manages to stick the landing with a completely unexpected happy ending on Sunday morning.

It is a great story, but it is heard in so many different ways. And we all bring our own stuff to the hearing of this story. Some of us have come this morning ready to praise, ready to be inspired and lifted. Others might be hoping to hear something or feel something that might reawaken a faith that has been languishing. For some it is about duty, or family, or maybe it's just the thing to do before Easter brunch. And others may not know exactly why you are here. Some of you might have had to muster a lot of courage just to walk through these doors. There are all kinds of reasons that we come to church on Easter Sunday. But I think most of them – perhaps even all of them -- have at least a little something to do with this story – this remarkable, memorable, far-fetched, unlikely, and perhaps even fantastical story. At some level, we are here to wrestle one more time with this old story, and ponder once again what we really think of it.

That's why I love the version of this story that Luke gives us. I love it because it leaves so much room for us, no matter where we might be on the spectrum of faith – no matter what we might think. Start with the women who visit the tomb. They are broken and grieving, but here they are showing up in the early morning light. They are there to do a job



– difficult, unpleasant, thankless job that the sabbath rules had made impossible on Friday afternoon. It is not hard for us to empathize with their feelings. Most of us know what it is like to lose a loved one or friend... most of us know what it is like to have high hopes crushed by a cruel world.

And then, the women are jarred into yet another strong emotion. They are shocked, confused, and perplexed by the fact that the tomb is empty. If you and I are perplexed by this strange story, imagine how the people who lived it must have felt.

And then, a new wrinkle, a mysterious proclamation that they then had to decide to believe or not to believe. Two men in dazzling white say “He is not here... he has risen.” On this Easter morning in 2022, do you believe that or not? Is it credible to you that a human being died on a cross on Friday, but somehow rose again by Sunday? What does common sense tell you? What does your heart tell you? What do faith and hope tell you? Again, it is not hard for us to relate to the emotional pinball machine these early disciples were in.

Somehow, though, they muster the will to go tell the others. The women run back to the where disciples were holed up to tell Peter, James, John and all the others. And now those guys have to figure out what *they* think of the story. And this is where we get right down to it. When the men hear the story, they absolutely do not buy it. They blow the whole story off, because, to quote the text, it “seemed to them an idle tale.”

It's a great word, “idle.” If we are idle, we are what? Bored. If we spend time on idle things, what are we doing? We are wasting time. That is exactly what was implied in the initial reaction to this story. The men were bored with this tale. They thought this story was a waste of time. Even more literally, the Greek word suggests that the story sounded to them like “trash.” It was baseless, silly, “showy, useless.”¹ There is even good reason to believe it was, if I can offer a euphemism more appropriate for a Sunday in church, the equivalent of what a farmer would add to the soil to make crops grow better.²

My mother spent some time teaching English and she would often recall something that one of her own professors had done when he felt like a student's paper was idling. He got a special stamp made up for grading papers, and if he thought a student was making a silly, baseless, or useless argument, he got out his red ink pad, inked up his special stamp, and slammed it down in the margin. The stamp was the outline of a bull. I think you get the picture now. When the disciples first heard this story about an empty tomb, they thought it was bogus, frivolous, a waste of time. It's like they got out their special stamp, inked it up, and slammed it down right on the head of the story the women were telling them. “Bull!”

If Easter is a time for anything, it's a time for honesty. And I think anyone who has really wrestled with this story can relate to this feeling. Most of us, in some way, have wondered about it. Could it be true? Can I believe this? Do I have to believe this? Because there is a part of me that wonders if it is, just as the disciples feared, an idle tale.

I have to admit, I was struggling with a similar kind of worry on the day when I went to the tomb of Jesus. At least, everyone told me it was the tomb of Jesus. It lies in the Old City of Jerusalem, in the central rotunda of an ancient basilica known as The Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Tradition holds that the cathedral was built on the actual site of the tomb where Jesus' body was laid. The exact site within the church is marked with a red granite

¹ Greek parsing of $\lambda\eta\rho\omicron\varsigma$ (Luke 24:11) found at www.perseus.tufts.edu, on March 31, 2010.

² <http://caitlinrussell.org/2016/03/27/it-seemed-to-them-an-idle-tale-or-those-intrepid-women-as-the-first-easter-preachers/>

structure several stories high. Adorned with massive candles, some of them towering 15 to 20 feet in height, the square stone building is covered with elaborate Coptic inscriptions. Smaller red candle holders, hung with gold chains, glowed all around it. The smell of wax and incense was heavy in the air.³

And the moment I saw it, my thought was, “No way. No way the real tomb of Jesus looked anything like this.” To be honest, the whole thing seemed to me “an idle tale.” But I had come halfway around the world to experience these things, and I had no intention of walking out of there without seeing for myself what centuries of Christians have celebrated as the tomb of Christ. So, I took my place in the line, and I waited. A number of my seminary colleagues were there with me, and we waited there together for a long time. It felt like we were in a long, twisting line to ride Space Mountain at Disney World.

And the closer I got to the entrance of the tomb, the more idle it all seemed. It was not that I thought faith was a waste of time. I did not think curiosity was useless. Far from it. What I was questioning was this: What exactly was I looking for? What was it that I had hoped to find at the tomb of Jesus?

And at that very moment, someone right behind me said it. He said what I had been thinking but had not yet been able to articulate in my mind. He said what I was feeling before I knew I was feeling it. And he said it in a voice that was loud enough to be heard by everyone in line:

“He is not here, he is risen!”

The words bounced off the walls of the red granite tomb and rose into the rotunda. They hung there in the scented air, and then dropped like a challenge upon all of us who were standing in that line. ***“Why are we looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen!”***

Before I had fully processed any of this, it was my turn to enter the tomb. The first door was pretty standard. Upon entering, you found yourself in what is called the “Chapel of the Angel,” which houses a piece of stone said to have been chipped from the rock that originally sealed Jesus’ tomb. This area is really just an antechamber to a second little room, which lay behind another interior door – a very, very small door that could not have been more than three or three-and-a-half feet tall. Crafted out of carved white marble, this was the entrance to the inner sanctum – the “Holy of Holies” within the Holy Sepulchre. With some difficulty, I leaned over, crouched down, and eased my way into the tomb of Jesus.

The room was only about two yards long and one yard wide. To the right side was a small altar where tradition says Christ’s body was laid. It is surrounded by ornate candlesticks and candles. I paused briefly to pray there, because that is what you do. And then I crouched back down to exit the tomb... and on my way out... ***I cracked my head on that low door.***

Now, I don’t mean I bumped my head. I mean I almost knocked myself out in the tomb of Jesus. When I finally struggled my way out into the church, I was literally seeing stars, and I had a big old knot on my head. And as soon as the haze cleared, the thought occurred to me, “You know, there might be a sermon in there somewhere.”

And that brings me back to all of us here this morning, we who have come for yet another visit to the tomb of Jesus... or to at least gather around the story of the tomb of Jesus. What did we think we were going to find here this morning? I think it is the same

³ [http://orthodoxwiki.org/Church_of_the_Holy_Sepulchre_\(Jerusalem\)](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Church_of_the_Holy_Sepulchre_(Jerusalem)), on March 31, 2010.

thing we hope to find every time we visit – that somehow we will pick up a little package of inspiration, almost like a gift bag at a party. It is the hope that we will gain some new insight, some inkling of a feeling, that draws us closer to God... closer to the Way, the Truth, and the Life. My prayer is that you do

At the very least, we have picked up a package of bread, which we will honor as the body of Christ, and a little container of juice, with which we remember his blood and the covenant promises he makes to us. Just as certainly, we have also found the body of Christ that is the church – we who are gathered here to be the body and blood of Christ in the world, the hands and feet of the God who remains active. So we do not go away empty.

But we may also have the sense that we have not found exactly what we are hoping for this morning, and we hear that old warning again. Why are we looking for the living among the dead? Christ is not just hanging out in here waiting for us to come pick him up. Christ has broken free of anything that would seek to contain him, be it a two-story square of red granite in the Old City of Jerusalem, or four walls here at the corner of Forest Park and Larchmont Avenue. The moment we think we have this Easter thing figured out, then it cracks you over the head with a reminder that the living God will not be tamed or contained or told where he can stand and where he cannot.

So, even if you still feel a little empty, be encouraged, if not inspired. Because I think you are here because even the most skeptical among us still wonder if there really is something to this old story... that maybe it is true that death is not the end... maybe it is true that evil does not always win... that maybe violence is not the way... that maybe God is still at work bringing life to a dying world... that maybe, just maybe, love is the strongest thing. There are a lot of reasons we have come here today, but I think at the heart of every one of us is a sense that this old story is NOT an idle tale after all.

Amen.