

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“An Idle Tale”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Easter—April 21, 2019

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

“At the crack of dawn on Sunday, the women came to the tomb carrying the burial spices they had prepared.”¹ These were the very same women who were singled out earlier in the gospel (8:1-3) as having provided for Jesus’ ministry in Galilee out of their resources. They were early supporters; some might argue every bit as much as the men. When they arrived, the stone was rolled away—not what they expected, and they simply went inside to see. They discovered that the body was gone. Jesus was not there and they were perplexed; they wondered what to make of this, when suddenly, as if out of nowhere two men, “light cascading over them,”² stood there.

At Bible study this past week, we talked about the hotel commercial on TV right now with the tag line “bada book, bada boom,” where leaders of this hotel company are preparing a new ad with guests glowing, and someone says: “Who glows?” Well people may not glow in hotels, but these two men were glowing in the tomb where the body of Jesus had been.

The women were terrified and they bowed their heads to the ground. But the men said “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over and be crucified and on the third day rise again. And it dawned on them. They remembered. And they took off to tell the others—especially the eleven—what they had seen.

Their reception is not what we might expect. They come rushing in, out of breath, to tell the extraordinarily good news that Jesus is risen. They take it upon themselves to remind the eleven and the others, what Jesus had told them—the story the glowing men had reminded the women. He is risen. He isn’t in the tomb. It is just what he told us back in Galilee. Remember what he said.

The response of the men to these women is: “There they go again.” “These words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.” The Greek word behind that response “is usually reserved to describe the ranting of a person suffering from delirium.”³ The irony here is that back in that same passage when these women are singled out for supporting the ministry of Jesus, “Mary Magdalene is described as one who was cured by Jesus, as one from whom seven demons had gone out. Mary Magdalene, who had at one time been truly beside herself,” one who truly was delirious, “is now among those who convey the good news!”⁴

And this idle tale did not begin with the women. It actually began with Jesus himself, back in Galilee when he explained that he would suffer and be killed and on the third day be raised. He told them he would be betrayed and they did not understand. It was an idle tale. So, don’t be surprised when the eleven don’t believe the women. It isn’t just that they are women in a society that has trouble learning from women. Their story is extraordinary. It is almost too good to be true. It is a big surprise. But the idle tale stirs some memory in Peter, and he gets up, maybe quietly, sneaking out so the others don’t see or ask questions or begin to wonder if he is losing it again; he gets up and runs to the tomb himself and sees for himself and is amazed. That amazement seems to be the first step in his brand

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. © 2002 NAV Press.

² Ibid.

³ Gregory A. Robbins, Exegetical Perspective, Luke 24: 1-12; in *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, General Editors © 2009 Westminster John Knox Press.

⁴ Ibid.

new life. It doesn't say if he ran back to let everyone know that the women were right. It doesn't say if he simply sat in the tomb and smiled at the discovery. Clearly he found a way to share what he had discovered or we wouldn't be here today.

Martin Marty writes: "Thanks to these first-day witnesses, there came later sets of witnesses, namely members of a community that kept the saving story alive long enough for Luke to stitch together a rich narrative...thanks to all of them, twenty centuries later, [we who were not there] to 'see' [have] now also 'seen' and [we get] to pass on the story to people who also were not there and to whom nothing was 'proven.'" They can be amazed and can tell others."⁵ And the story goes on.

Here in this church and in every church in every place there are people who believe, people who serve, people who care because someone else embodied the good news for them. Someone else was a witness. Someone else shared their own experience of the resurrection.

I think of a little boy whose parents did not go to church, but some neighbors did and they invited that little boy to join them, week by week, and they modeled the good news of God's love for the world. They shared what some might have considered an idle tale, and in the telling, in the living of that tale, that little boy discovered something precious for himself and he grew up to become a pillar in his own church and in his own life he himself has also become a witness, an example of the truth of the resurrection.

Anne Lamott writes about her friend Rick, who moved in with his girlfriend at the far end of their street a few years ago, and then "about ten minutes later he was diagnosed with lung cancer. It had metastasized to his brain. He has done surgery, chemo, radiation, and every imaginable alternative medicine but is still living with both his beautiful girlfriend and stage-four metastatic lung cancer. He usually drives by our house a couple of times a day and seems to be in a quietly good mood most of the time.... I read an interview he did for a Buddhist quarterly recently," she says, "in which he said that he's so savoring the moments of his life right now, so acutely aware of love and small pleasures that he no longer feels that he has a life-threatening disease: he now says he's leading a disease-threatening life."⁶ That is a witness to the resurrection.

John Buchanan writes about the death of his wife's brother at the start of Lent. "I was reminded that we were moving toward the celebration of resurrection. I thought of the radical conviction upon which our faith rests—that there is a power loose in the universe that overcomes even death." Several years later, Buchanan's father-in-law died at the same time of year. Buchanan's wife "sat by his bedside on the last night, holding his hand. 'What did you do all night long?' [Buchanan] asked. 'What did you say?'"

"'I ran out of things to say,' she explained, 'so I sang all the Easter hymns I could remember, and I said, 'Easter's coming, Daddy, Easter's coming.''"⁷

That really is our proclamation. In a world that too often resembles Good Friday, with suffering and broken hearts here in Wilmington, in Louisiana, in Paris, in Cape Town, in too many places, in our own Good Friday world, we too proclaim what we have discovered for ourselves and what some might think an idle tale: Easter's coming, friends, Easter's coming.

⁵ Martin E. Marty, *Theological Perspective Luke 24: 1-12*; in *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, General Editors © 2009 Westminster John Knox Press.

⁶ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith* © 1999 Pantheon Books

⁷ John M. Buchanan, *Easter's Coming*, in *The Christian Century*, Vol 130 No 6. March 20, 2013 © 2013

Let us pray: On this Easter, as on that very first day, you come, Steadfast Love, walking with us to discover the good news of the empty grave, so that we can run to tell everyone we meet.

On this Easter, as on that very first morning, you wait and watch, Gardener of our hearts, as we seek to understand this mystery which leaves us scratching our heads, until we turn to you for answers and discover all we need to know when you call us by our names.

On this Easter, as in these first moments, you whisper to us, Spirit of broken hearts, of love which rolls away fears, of hope which folds grave clothes, of grace which overturns every assumption.

On this Easter, as on all days, you are our grace, our hope, our peace. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.⁸

⁸ Adapted from Lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.com, Liturgy with communion for April 21, 2019 (Resurrection of the Lord-C. © 2019 Thom M. Shuman