

Easter Nonsense

Luke 24:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

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One thing I appreciate about preaching on Easter year after year is the opportunity to notice something new in this familiar story. And so it has been for me this year with Luke's account. There is a wonderful detail that somehow I have missed before. In Luke's account, as in the other gospels, the women who followed Jesus are the first to receive the news that he is risen. They are the first to receive this news because they have gone to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices, as was the custom. It is the kind of servant's task that would fall to women. Then again, in Jesus' realm, the ones who assume the role of servant are often the ones who are encountering God.

The eleven apostles didn't venture out to the tomb. They were probably hiding out, hoping that the ones who crucified Jesus would not go after his followers next. So when the women find the apostles and tell about the empty tomb and their encounter with those two men in dazzling clothes, the apostles—whether out of fear, or due to first century sexism—dismiss their words. "It's just an idle tale," they might have said. "Women like to gossip. And they're so emotional. We're men of the world. We know better." One translation is even more blunt in the way it recounts the apostles' reaction. The women come to bring them good news of the empty tomb and the word that Jesus has been raised, and the apostles derisively respond, "Nonsense!"

But here is the wonderful, telling detail that somehow I have missed all these years. It is after the apostles join in a unison chorus, declaring, "Nonsense!" that Peter immediately gets up and starts running toward the tomb to check out this nonsense for himself. "Nonsense!" says Peter, and with that he is off like a shot, as if the word he had just spoken were like the crack of a gun that starts a race. I love the juxtaposition of those two reactions ("Nonsense!" and "Let's check it out!") because I think it says a great deal about the mix of belief and disbelief that was a part of the first Easter and every subsequent Easter as well. The head may say, "Nonsense," but then our eager and running feet bring us here to check it out.

Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the last century, said that what brings people to worship—not just on Easter, but any day—is an unspoken question clinging to their hearts and minds and that question is simply this: "Is it true?" Is it true that God lives and gives us life? Is it true that God not only established a routine, what we call the laws of nature, but that one day God broke the routine and somehow raised Jesus from the dead? Is it true that something so extraordinary happened on that morning that we can only rebuild our lives on its foundation? Is it true?

Such powerful questions. And they are unavoidable on a day such as this. Sometimes I am tempted to conclude that Easter is not a day for beginners. Rather, it can seem as if Easter is the advanced course for Christians, to be undertaken only after completing the introductory courses that deal with Jesus' life and teachings. Begin with the Sermon on the Mount. Marvel at Jesus' wisdom. Learn from him. Become fascinated by his life, fixed on his person. If one begins there, perhaps then one will be better prepared to hear this mysterious tale about Jesus rising from the dead.

How odd it is that people flock to worship on this day. Easter seems not a day for beginners. In many ways Easter seems like the advanced course.

And yet, it is clear from those who knew Jesus, from the apostles of the early church and from the authors of Scripture, that Easter is not the dramatic conclusion to the story for those who are able to follow it that far. Rather, Easter is the beginning. Read the first sermons that were ever preached in the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts. With what do they begin? They make no reference to Jesus' teachings. His earthly life receives scant attention. It is almost as if the story of his life is only of interest if we see it from the vantage points of Easter. Even Jesus' teachings are not seen as important in their own right because there is little that is original in them. Rather, they take on meaning only when we take into full account who the teacher is, that is, God's chosen one who is to die and be raised again. This is why the gospels have been called Easter accounts with extended prologues. For the early followers of Jesus, the beginning point of Christian proclamation was the Easter event.

Over and over the disciples started with proclamations about Easter, as if it were the only place to begin. Through the centuries Christians have begun their journey of faith by running to the empty tomb. Make no mistake about this: the idea that God could raise someone from the dead would be as difficult for these people to believe as it is for us. These ancient people were not stupid. They had seen many people die and never once had they seen anyone come to life again. Yes, there was something in the story to doubt, but there is another way to put it: there was something in the story that reached the deepest regions of their hearts and minds where both doubt and faith are found. That is, in the resurrection God gave us such a miracle of love and forgiveness that it is worthy of faith and thus open to doubt. The very doubts we may hold attest to the scale and power of what we proclaim.

And so, the place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things we never doubt. Realities about which we hold no doubt may not be large enough to reveal God to us. And so we say without apology or hesitation: what we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty, too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imaginations.

Easter may be just the place for beginners, after all. The place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things that are beyond the reach of our doubt. Rather, perhaps we need to begin where the early church began, with the larger realities and deeper mysteries that are open to doubt but are also large enough and deep enough to reveal something of God to us. That is the promise that is held out to us this day, the promise of Easter, which has always been the occasion of the greatest doubt and also the source of the most profound faith throughout history. Perhaps we will find that the early church was right to begin just here, where the stakes are highest, risking doubt in order to claim a larger faith. Could it be that one of the reasons that churches are filled on a day such as this is that we long to swim in the depths of realities that are large enough to reveal God to us, where both the risk and the promise are that much greater?

But let us return to Barth's question, the question that he claimed is the one that brings us here: "Is it true?" On this the gospel writers agree, and this I believe: Jesus appeared to the disciples and others after his death, in such a sure and unmistakable way that they agree that it was Jesus. They grope for ways to express the reality of it, as we might grope to express love to a person who has never experienced it, but it is no less real for their inability to fully capture the experience in words. Of this the

disciples and gospel writers were sure: It was Jesus. It was not simply the power of his memory overcoming them, not some generalized sense of the presence of God. It was Jesus, in the midst of them again in a way that was previously unknown and as unimaginable to them as it is to us. It was an experience of which they were so sure that it changed their lives immediately and for all time. It was an experience of such power that they could no more ignore it than they could ignore their own lives.

The accounts differ on the particulars. In some accounts Jesus appeared and then disappeared again as quickly as a thought, staying only long enough to impress their souls for all time. To some Jesus spoke, and to others he merely appeared without speaking. For some Jesus could only be described as a spiritual presence, while for others his presence was so real that they could only say he appeared in bodily form—which is really another way of presenting the striking truth to us who were not there to be struck by the experience of knowing with wonder and awe that, He lives! He lives just as surely as you or I live, yet in a different way all the same.

The variations in the accounts are not troubling, for all point unmistakably in the same direction. And they are, after all, trying to describe a reality that is finally indescribable, like trying to describe spring to those who have known only winter. So the language they use is evocative, chosen to evoke in us the same reaction that was surely theirs. It is as if the disciples and gospel writers are trying to describe music to people who are deaf—so they dance and hope we catch a small sense of what music is about, for a small sense is enough. It is as if they are trying to describe a sunset to those of us who are blind—so they say it is like trumpet fanfare and hope we catch a glimmer of the majesty and power of it, for a glimmer is still enough.

Something happened that day. We know *something* happened because something unexpected, something powerful, something marvelous turned the followers of Jesus, this huddle of dispirited men and women, into a valiant band ready to dare anything and doing it. Something made them leave the dark comfort of the room in which they hid to proclaim in the light of day, “He lives!” Something which they could only describe as Jesus happened to them, and they could no more hold it in than a new mother could hold in the news of the birth of her child, no more than a blind man could ignore the restoration of his sight.

This is the good news that the disciples claimed, or should I say, it is the good news that claimed them. And they knew from that moment on that their lives could never be the same again. That one experience propelled them into the everlasting presence of God in a way that was previously unknown and unimagined. And it can be the same for us. If we touch this truth, ever so lightly, even for a moment, our lives will be sustained by its power.

Did the disciples have reason to doubt that it was true? Certainly. It says in Luke that even after seeing Jesus they “disbelieved for joy.” It seemed simply too good to be true. It was not easy to believe that good could dislodge evil. It was not easy to believe that there is a forgiveness larger than human sin. It was not easy to believe that life is ultimately triumphant over the power of death. But the same event that gave them reason to doubt also equipped them to believe.

We too may respond with doubt, declaring, “Nonsense!” even as we rush with racing hearts to check out this nonsense for ourselves. We may respond by saying, “It’s too good to be true.” But is such a response really all that far from the response that is made in faith— “With God, it’s too good *not* to be true”?