

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-11

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It seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them. The women's testimonies about Jesus', *their* Jesus', rising again — the women's words about resurrection breaking the power of death — seemed to the eleven disciples to be just empty talk, a silly story, utter nonsense, sheer humbug. "I'm sorry ladies— but that is not the way it works. When you are dead, you are dead. When you are in the pit, you stay in the pit. What you see is all there is. Stones placed in front of tombs on Fridays are still in place on Sundays." "*Their words seemed to them an idle tale*" is putting it lightly.

I am sure the women must have understood the men's hesitation. As they had made their way to the tomb that morning, they, themselves, felt that same old world grip of death wound tightly around their own hearts. The Sabbath day had ended. They were certain Jesus' dead body still remained. Plus, they needed to go to the tomb in order to anoint his body properly and privately. They needed to touch the body of their Rabbi just one more time, to minister to him in his death the way he had ministered to them in his life, if for no other reason than for their own last grasp for closure.

So the women started that day making their way to the tomb, with the old world grip of death winding around their own hearts, holding spices in hand, and looking for Jesus' corpse. Our text tells us they started the journey at early dawn, but another way to translate that phrase is as "deep dawn." "Deep dawn is that indefinable time between darkness and light...that time when you decide either that the promise in which you believe is true; or the promise in which you believe is a lie."¹ And as the women stood in the middle of deep dawn time, what they found when they arrived at the tomb completely undid them. "Perplexed" is how our text puts it—but that is understating it a bit. One can also translate that word to say the women were disturbed, uncertain, at a loss. Well, of course they were. Who can blame them?

They had gone to the tomb at deep dawn—at that time between darkness and light, that time when you choose to either believe the promise or not. But they could not make the choice between belief or unbelief because they could not even *remember* the promises Jesus had made while he was with them. The old world grip of death was so tightly wound around their hearts that it was squeezing hope dry. So when they arrived at that tomb in the middle of deep dawn and they could not find his body, they were left at a complete loss. The old world, the old framework for understanding life, the old way of living Good Friday lives with stripped chancels and stripped hopes—that old world still rang in their minds and hearts. And yet—here they were—standing in an empty tomb, holding spices in hand, and listening as two men in dazzling clothes asked them why they were looking for the living among the dead.

Why? Because that is the way it happens. Dead bodies stay dead. What you see is all there is. Stones placed in front of tombs on Fridays are still there in place on Sundays. Why are they looking for Jesus' body? They were looking for his body because they had watched him die. Standing there in the empty tomb in the middle of deep dawn, the old world grip of death was still tightly wound around their hearts.

“But sisters,” the men said, “your Jesus is not here. He has risen. Don’t you remember what he told you when he was with you in Galilee — that the Son of Man would be handed over, crucified, and then raised? Don’t you remember his words of promise?” On their way, at deep dawn, the women had not been able to remember. But now — standing in that empty tomb — they were confronted face to face with the new reality that somehow, through God’s power of life, the stone had been rolled away; somehow, through God’s power of life, the tomb was empty; somehow, through God’s power of life, Jesus had been resurrected and lived again. And even in their shock and surprise, the women began to remember all the promises they had heard in their time with Jesus.

“I remember” — one must have said to another. “I remember now that he told us that he would be handed over, crucified, and would rise again. How could I have forgotten that?” “I remember too,” another one said. “I remember how he said what is impossible for mortals is possible for God. How could I have forgotten that?” “I remember,” another one shouted as they ran back from the tomb, dropping their spices as they went along, “I remember how he said the kingdom of God was coming, was here, was among us in him. How could I have forgotten that?” “I remember,” Mary Magdalene might have claimed, “I remember all those times he told us who and whose he was — our brother, our Messiah, the one for whom we have waited. How could I have forgotten that?”

And as they remembered all Jesus had promised them, as they reminded each other all Jesus had promised them, the time of deep dawn started to fade, and the early morning sun began to make its way over the horizon. And as they remembered, as they reminded each other of all the promises — promises of resurrection newness — promises of abundant life — promises of a God whose power of life would trample the power of death — the old world grip of death started to loosen its tentacles from their hearts and fall away. And by the time the women reached the others, the old world grip of death was banished completely.

And the women rushed into the room that sheltered the other eleven disciples, and all the women began talking at once. “Don’t you remember what Jesus promised?” they asked the men. “Don’t you remember how he said God would raise him from the dead? It has happened. We have seen it with our own eyes. We have remembered with our own hearts.”

The women must have told those disciples, “We can’t explain it to you, but we have experienced it. We can’t tell you how it happened, but we trust it has. Brothers, Easter rises. In the middle of betrayal and death, in the middle of shadows and denial, in the middle of pain and loss, in the middle of tombs and crosses, Easter rises. There is hope — my brothers — there is hope, but you have to remember what Jesus said. You have to remember what Jesus promised in order to see the new world in all its glory.” And surely after they told their brothers all they had seen and heard, the women must have taken a collective deep breath and waited...waited to see their reaction to the news.

But to those men locked up in that room — scared, ashamed, guilty — the women’s words seemed to be an idle tale: empty talk, a silly story, utter nonsense, sheer humbug. They just could not remember. The old world grip of death still wound its way around their hearts. In that locked room, they found it too difficult to believe the power of resurrection.

What about you this morning? Does this testimony from these women sound like merely an idle tale to you—empty talk, a silly story, utter nonsense, sheer humbug? At this moment in your life, are you walking through a time of deep dawn—a time when you have to decide if what you see is all there is to our lives and to our world, or that there is a different power at work—a resurrection power at work in our lives and in our world? Are you at a time in your life when, if you are honest, you feel the old world grip of death still winding its way around your heart so that any words of empty tombs and Easter rising ring shallow? If you are, you are in good company with the other 11 disciples. But, if you are, I need to tell you the rest of their story.

When the women first returned, all talking at once, trying to describe their experience of resurrection and their new vision of hope, the other 11 disciples could not believe them. They could not believe them because they could not remember the promises. They could not remember what Jesus had told them in Galilee because they were too scared, too ashamed, too guilty to recall. But just like the empty tomb proclaimed death did not have the last word on Jesus' life, their amnesia did not have the last word on their lives either.

For later on that same day, the risen Jesus came to be with them to remind them himself of all the promises he had made—to let them touch his wounds, watch him eat, see with their own eyes how resurrection power had broken out all over their world. And slowly but surely, by God's Spirit, even those 11 disciples found the old world grip of death loosening and falling away.

And, slowly but surely, with Jesus' help, they were able to remember all of those promises and start to believe. And in that remembering, they discovered that they weren't just disciples, followers, of Jesus anymore. They were now apostles—people sent—summoned by Jesus the living Christ to tell all they had seen and heard and experienced of resurrection power and new life. And their moment of deep dawn faded, and the sun rose for them, too.

Now, I realize that for those of us struggling with this testimony sounding like an idle tale, the rest of their story is not a completely fair comparison. For the risen Lord came and stood among them—letting them touch his wounds, watch him eat, listen to his promises again. And I am guessing that for most of us, that kind of appearance of our risen Lord has not happened.

And yet, by God's Spirit, we can join the disciples in remembering all of the promises we have heard and trusting they are true. We can join the disciples in trusting and believing in our own lives that Easter always rises—no matter what the old world tries to tell us, and no matter how many times we have to wrestle with doubt and unbelief. As William Sloane Coffin always preached, "We may kill God's love, but we cannot keep it dead and buried!"

Easter always rises. The power of resurrection always breaks out. That is the testimony of our faith on this Easter Sunday. That is the testimony that broke out with those women at the empty tomb and those disciples in the locked room. That is our testimony that has been handed down from generation to generation to generation so that all those who follow, all those who are sent to proclaim the Lord, crucified and risen, can remember God's promises and believe. Believe that the old world grip of death has been broken forever. Believe that things are not simply the way they seem. Believe that we can get out of the pit; we will find hope emerging from despair; we can live new resurrection lives here and now; God's love will not be kept dead and buried.

Why? Because the stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. Our crucified Lord has risen! The power of resurrection is forever set loose into our world. We can remember those promises. My goodness, how could we forget?

The Lord is risen!
He is risen indeed!

Note

¹ This phrase and definition was used in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowrey, found in the *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2004.