

“AN IDLE TALE”??

Sermon by the Rev. Douglas L Clark, March 27, 2016 – Easter Sunday
Haddam and Higganum Congregational Churches
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.

Luke 24:1-11 (*NRSV, slightly adapted*)

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The 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. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.



What a morning it must have been for Mary Magdalene and her women friends—Joanna and Mary the mother of James and Salome. These women, and others whose names have been lost to history, had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. They had been there when Jesus was crucified. They had been there when Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus' body in a linen shroud and laid it in a tomb and rolled the heavy stone across the entrance to the tomb.

Among all those who had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, it was only the women who were witnesses to his crucifixion and death and burial on Good Friday. And, early in the morning on Easter Sunday, the women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Not surprisingly, when the women returned from the tomb and told the men what they had seen and heard, the women's words “seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

Why is the reaction of the men not surprising? Well, for one thing, in Jewish and Greco-Roman culture in the first century of the common era, women were treated by the legal systems as unreliable witnesses. If a woman brought an accusation against a man, and the man denied the accusation, and there were no male witnesses to support the woman's accusation, only the man's word mattered.

Sound familiar? Even in the twenty-first century of the common era, women continue to be treated as unreliable witnesses. Time and again, we hear of women who bring serious accusations of sexual misconduct against men, and they are not believed. Even when numerous women accuse the same man of sexual harassment, they are not believed. Women's words about their experiences are often dismissed out of hand. Even in the twenty-first century of the common era.

The gospel of Luke is silent about the women's reaction to the men's dismissive attitude toward their testimony. (Depending on which translation or paraphrase you read, the men “thought it was nonsense,” or they “thought the women were making it all up.”) It's not hard for me to imagine the women exchanging knowing glances with each other, since they knew that their words were not an “idle tale.”

No doubt the women were used to being stereotyped as unreliable witnesses. No doubt they were accustomed to not being taken seriously. (One thing they did know for certain: **Jesus** had always taken them seriously. Otherwise, why would they have followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem?)

One thing we can know for certain about the Easter narratives is their historical authenticity. Given the role and status of women in the first century of the common era, the early church would never have made up a story that featured women as the first witnesses to the resurrection. What the women told the men was not nonsense. It was not an idle tale. In fact, what they told the men, and what the church has continued to tell the world since then, is a transformative truth about Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen.

In the Jewish world of Jesus and his followers, the resurrection of the dead was not an alien concept. True, some of Jesus' contemporaries—the Sadducees in particular—didn't believe in resurrection. Many others, including the Pharisees and Jesus himself, did believe that there would be a resurrection of the dead at the end of history.

This general resurrection was expected to be a time of final judgment, when “those who have done good” would experience “the resurrection of life,” and “those who have done evil” would experience “the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:29). Since everyone could see that in this life, not everyone who does good is rewarded, and not everyone who does evil is punished, there had to be some way in which God would finally balance the scales of justice.

Recent scholarship has shown that in the time of Jesus, both before Good Friday and after Easter, “[m]any ancient Jews and Christians held, unshakably, that resurrection was [both] a bodily *and* a communal event.”¹ So on the one hand, the empty tomb was a clear sign of Jesus' bodily resurrection, which could signify God's vindication of Jesus.

On the other hand, Jesus' resurrection from the dead could also signify the onset of the great and terrible day of judgment, when both the living and the dead would be held accountable for how they had lived their lives. Imagine how you and I might feel if we thought we would soon be standing in the presence of God and facing God's judgment. When Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” at a preaching conference in Enfield, CT, on July 8, 1741, many of his hearers were terrified that God's judgment upon them was imminent.

So it shouldn't surprise us that the women at the empty tomb were initially “terrified” by the news that Jesus had risen from the dead. But they were also reassured by the good news of Jesus' resurrection, because it meant for them that God had vindicated Jesus' ministry and message.

The good news of Jesus' resurrection also meant that their decisions to follow Jesus, from Galilee to Golgotha, had been vindicated by God. The good news of Jesus' resurrection meant that they could continue to fully devote their lives to Jesus' ministry and message. Continuing to follow Jesus would be life-giving and life-transforming—for women, for men, for children.

In the years following Jesus' resurrection, the early Christians came to believe that resurrection life was not only a future hope, but also a present reality. These early Christians understood that their baptism by immersion, which was their initiation into the Christian community, was a death and resurrection experience. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with

¹Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection – The Power of God for Jews and Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:3-5). Future hope, but also present reality: walking in newness of life.

I do not claim to know what resurrection life will be like in the last days. I do know that in these days, in this life, the only life we know, God calls us, as individuals and as a community, to “walk in newness of life” by doing justice, by loving mercy, and by practicing humility and hospitality. We do not need an afterlife to show us how to live this present life. We do not need the fear of eternal damnation, nor the hope of eternal happiness, to convince us to walk in newness of life together.

Anne Lamott says that because of the resurrection, we who follow Jesus are Easter people in a Good Friday world. On that first Easter morning in the first century of the common era, Mary Magdalene and her friends Joanna and Mary and Salome were chosen by God to be the first witnesses to the present reality of resurrection. They became the first Easter people in a Good Friday world.

The story the women told to the men that morning was not an idle tale. It was not nonsense. It was not something the women had made up. Their witness, their testimony, was true then, and it is true now, even in our skeptical desacralized postmodern world. Even in the twenty-first century of the common era. The story of resurrection, the witness of Jesus' closest women friends, invites us to be Easter people in our own Good Friday world.