

## Sermon Easter – TUMC, April 16, 2017

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### An “Idle Tale?”

Luke 24:1-12

As we hear the Gospel of Luke’s account of the first hint of Jesus’s possible resurrection, I have a question for you: Who do you think *you* would have been in that story?

- Would you be one of the disciples who were paralyzed with grief or fear and stayed behind closed doors just to be careful?
- Would you be one of the disciples who went to the grave to tend to Jesus’ body in very practical ways? Perhaps even running a certain risk just because it was the right thing to do?
- Would you be one of the disciples who couldn’t believe anyone else’s account until they could see the “evidence” for themselves? And even then... had to take some time alone to consider all of it.<sup>1</sup>
- Would you be one of the disciples who dismissed Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary’s (mother of James) and the other women’s experience as an “idle tale”?
- (The final option, of course is that you could be one of the glowing angels at the tomb, but that takes more imagination!)

What I like about this version of the resurrection in Luke’s Gospel is that it gives us permission to struggle with what happened. After all, the resurrection, before it came to live in the realms of our liturgical imagination, happened in the real world. Even the followers of Jesus had to be reminded about what he had said about rising again. It took them a while to sort things out, and they probably disagreed about what to do next. Even the disciples couldn’t get their heads around it and thought that the women’s fantastic experience was an “idle tale.” A few of them even

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<sup>1</sup> apparently the Greek version suggests an image of Peter wandering and wondering to himself <http://lectionarygreek.blogspot.ca/>

required further experience with the resurrection before embracing it. And who knows how many of them walked away, just couldn't handle it.

Since I studied theology, at Easter, every year, I try to get my head around the resurrection. Faith for me includes a lot of questions and doubts – otherwise it would be called certainty, not faith. I visit and revisit, imagine and re-imagine this foundational story of our Christian religion and its implications for our context.

In my church experience, often Jesus' bodily resurrection has been presented so categorically, so non-negotiably that if you have any qualms or even twinges about the details, you can be made to feel as being less than Christian. This is not helped by a long argument by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 where he deems anyone who questions the bodily resurrection of Jesus as having a futile faith and as being worthy of being pitied. I guess in his context of persecution that was the case. A more generous modern-day author says "If you don't find the resurrection hard to believe, you're probably not taking it seriously."<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays it is also true that folks who like to understand resurrection only symbolically, think that anyone who believes in Jesus' bodily resurrection is somehow lacking in intellectual capacity, or a sucker for an idle outdated tale.

I find it's all a bit more complicated and a bit more simple than all that. The only way that I can explain resurrection is that it is beyond our naming. It's closer to poetry than to prose.

I get this idea from theologian Walter Brueggemann<sup>3</sup> who talks about our tendencies to take things that are poetic – by that he means things that are open ended, metaphorical, full of possible meanings, words that are grasping at what cannot be expressed in words – we take these things that are poetic and turn them into

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<sup>2</sup> David Lore, Working Preacher.org

<sup>3</sup> in his book *Finally Comes the Poet*

technical ways of thinking. In doing so we reduce mystery to problem, assurance into certitude, quality into quantity, and put the biblical narrative into very manageable shapes. He calls people of faith to be “poets that speak against a prose world.”

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke says it this way: “I feel closer to what language can’t reach.” Resurrection is in that category.

It is handy that the so-called “church fathers” decided to meld Easter with Spring in the northern hemispheres, because all those powerful metaphors of dead bulbs budding out of decay and leading to new life are fresh in our minds and inspire us every season.

It’s a bit harder to imagine resurrection in November, when nothing but a promise of long winter is ahead of us. Yet that kind of imagination is what is required for us in living God’s reign. That need for hope in November is at least one of the reasons I have a magnolia tree in my backyard: magnolias sets their buds in the fall and hold on to them all winter long and only lets them bloom when Spring is here for sure. I look at my magnolia buds a lot.

I can’t help but wonder, when resurrection got turned into a simple hope for getting into heaven or a yearly Spring festival, or even a hope of that final battle where we will WIN!. Have we tamed the resurrection? At the time of Jesus and in the early church, his resurrection was a wild, fantastical story. It was an utterly unbelievable surprise. It boggled the mind! (One author even wondered, “Was Jesus shocked to be alive?⁴)

More importantly, the experience of a resurrected Jesus transformed a band of cowardly peasants into powerful and courageous preachers and healers.<sup>5</sup> It also

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*

<sup>5</sup> a nod to NT Wright.

inspired those who were hearing the gospel of Luke because it was written in dark political times after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem. It told them, and tells us about transforming power, power over death, power to transcend one human's experience. It told them that this power was on their side despite appearances. Something extraordinary happened to these people. Something so powerful we are still here today, centuries later, aligning ourselves with it, hoping for and celebrating that same transformative power, that same hope that God can transcend our human existence.

So, I've realized, that it is not at all about getting one's head around the resurrection, finding evidence, dissecting eye-witness accounts. Could it be that we are invited to encounter this story in another mode? A different way of knowing? Or as poetry, as Brueggemann suggests.

You see, we don't always know what we don't know so we could be limiting ourselves.

I was reminded of this in a couple of ways this week. I saw a touching video of a man who has colour-blindness and he was given glasses that presumably correct it, or change it to more average ways of seeing things. He puts on the glasses, he looks at the grass and his children and begins to cry with emotion. It's a whole new world, a whole new way of seeing things. I can't imagine what that would be like, to have a new dimension of knowing open up like that. To have your reality altered. That is what happened for the disciples.

I also watched the life of plants in a series called Life – it's narrated by David Attenborough, so you know it's good, right? This particular episode relies on very sophisticated photography using very close up images and time-lapses that speed up the life-cycle of plants. It is fascinating, because at that speed plants move and dance, and reach and even hunt. We can't see it to the naked eye, it's all going on and we are not even aware of it.

And this doesn't even cover the cosmos, the amazing universe beyond our planet! Our quantum physics. We don't know what we don't know. So I am putting the resurrection into the category of the not-always-explainable-with-words-and-concepts, rather something that is staggeringly incomprehensible. Inconceivable, but no less real.

The women who went to the tomb – and inspired sunrise services and Sunday worship ever since – had a mysterious, mystical, otherworldly, poetic, indescribable experience.

Why weren't the disciples amazed at the news? The women had lived and learned alongside Jesus just the same as the other disciples, they had been trusted and even contributed from their own resources to Jesus' cause. They had stayed with him during the crucifixion when others ran away. Yet now, they were being questioned as unreliable. I can imagine their frustration at being dismissed after they came back running and euphoric and then being greeted with demands for evidence, proof. Eventually the other disciples all had their own experiences, and they did come around.

This year I'm drawn to just listen to the women and their experience, not to try to get my head around it, but to keep it huge and mysterious. Maybe try to get my heart around it, or to just accept it as their transformative experience as is. Just being amazed and hopeful.

Why am I telling you all this? Maybe you've gone through similar questions. Because getting our heads around the resurrection can be a distraction a roadblock, it can domesticate it. What we need most urgently is to figure out how to wholeheartedly reaffirm and tap into this incredible power of transformation. The short version for it is: Christ is alive. Through this, disciples who were cowering were able to transcend their limited scope and extend God's love to others even to us.

Resurrection is a power that transcends one human's existence; a power that takes away the fear of death. Through this power many have been able to withstand persecution in the cause of peace. It is a power that causes the Michael Sharps of the world to fearlessly put their lives into the work of peace and reconciliation in the face of evil. Michael Sharp is a UN peace worker who was killed along with his companions working for peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is also the renewing power beyond our own efforts that can bring our congregation the healing that we all desire.

We are living in trying times. The powers of our day are the same misguided violent sinful systems that led to Jesus' senseless, senseless death. Except they have much bigger guns. Madmen running crazy destructive systems, God help us!

Jesus faced death by this sinful system without seeking retaliation, without resorting to violence, with forgiveness on his lips. And in so doing he put an end to the cycle of violence, the tit for tat, you bomb me, I bomb you. His resurrection means that there is a power in this, a power greater than that system, a power that can transform and transcend systemic violence. This is the hope that we need.

Maybe the apostle Paul had a point after all, if we don't rely on a power that is greater than our human existence, than our human understanding, then we do lose something crucial. Resurrection is our hope.

Christ is risen!