

Unnatural Event
Luke 24:1-12
First Presbyterian Church
April 21, 2019
Easter Sunday

Introduction to the Reading

A pastor walked into the “Huckleberry”
 (the ice cream shop) at Montreat one day
 and was surprised to see someone
 he had known decades before in seminary.

Her name was Miss Ada...

 or that’s what everybody called her.

He remembered Miss Ada as being a tad eccentric:

 though not a student,

 she never missed a chapel service.

 she was known for intercepting busy professors

 as the crossed the quadrangle...

 to ask them complex theological questions.

 and at formal receptions

 she would greet visiting dignitaries

 as if she owned the place.

This pastor greeted Miss Ada warmly,

 re-introduced himself and asked:

 “What are you doing here in Montreat?”

“Well,” she said, “I haven’t been here in over 40 years.

 But the last time I was here,

 I worshipped in Anderson Auditorium,

 and just as the preacher got up to preach

 someone handed him a note

 which he read on the way to the pulpit.

“I’ve got good news!” he said grabbing the microphone.

 “World War II is over! Peace has been declared.”

“It’s been so long since I’ve heard any good news,”

 Miss Ada continued,

 ‘I just thought I would come back here

 and see if I could hear some...

 because you know,

 I’m not sure how much longer I can go

 without hearing some good news.”¹

¹ I reference this story in a sermon from 1995, but have long since lost any record of where I heard it.

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they 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. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Sermon

The Sunday of the Resurrection

is not only the highest of holy days in the church year,
it is the only one that is set by the moon.

So, here's one for your next trivia game –

Easter always falls on the first Sunday...
after the first full moon...
on or after the spring equinox.

Now, as complicated as that sounds,

it makes perfect sense...
even more, it makes ancient sense
because it means that Easter
coincides with the greening of the earth...
with the awakening of the nature
after months of winter slumber.

And that is happening, isn't it?

Save for the occasional chilly morning,
spring has finally come
and God's handiwork is on full display.

The tulips had a very good year...

I know my grass is never more green than it is right now...
the azaleas and redbud and dogwoods
splash our yards and highways with color.

When I walk out for the newspaper each morning,

I've noticed something –
the birds couldn't care less
that some people might be sleeping.

Except for that “pesky pollen,”
it has happened once again –
the natural world has served us up
a very rich feast this blessed Easter morn.
So, you can well understand how our ancestors in faith
made the happy connection
between the resurrection of Christ from the dead
and the greening of the earth...
between the church’s highest holy day
and God’s renewing of creation.
BUT... it is also a misleading connection...
because spring – as wonderful as it is –
is completely natural.
Buy a daffodil bulb in the winter
and what does it look like?
Like a small onion maybe,
with its thin skin and scraggly roots.
But if you have any experience with bulbs,
this doesn’t worry you.
You know all you have to do is wait...
come springtime it will escape the earth
and explode like a yellow butterfly shedding its cocoon.
Well, as miraculous as that is...
it is completely natural.
Resurrection is entirely UNnatural.²
When a human being goes into the ground, that is that.
You don’t wait around for the person to reappear
so you can pick up where you left off...
not this side of the grave, anyway.
No, you say goodbye.
You pay your respects
and go on with your life the best you can,
knowing that the only place springtime happens
in a cemetery is on top of the graves, not in them.
Each of the Gospel writers
has his own way of making this point.
Mark writes that the giant tombstone is already rolled away
and a young man dressed in white
is sitting where Jesus should be.
Matthew tells basically the same story

² For this particular sermon path, I am indebted to Theodore J. Wardlaw in his essay on the text in *Christian Century*, March 20, 2007, p. 19 and Barbara Brown Taylor in her essay in *Christian Century*, March 20-27, 1996, p. 325.

except he adds that there was a great earthquake involved.
John tells us that Mary Magdalene is so distraught
 that through her tears she mistakes Jesus for a gardener...
 yet, when he calls her by name she knows him.
 And finally, when **Luke** goes to remind us
 there's nothing natural about resurrection,
 he does it in a very interesting way:
 he uses a little three-letter word - 'but.'
 Luke's account is peppered with the word **but**.
 The 23rd chapter ends with Joseph of Arimathea
 wrapping up Jesus' dead body
 and placing it in a tomb.
"BUT" begins chapter 24,
 "on the first day of the week at early dawn,
 the women came to the tomb
 with the spices they had prepared."
 "They found the stone rolled away,
BUT when they went in, they did not find the body."
 "Why do you look for the living among the dead?
 He is not here, **BUT** has risen."
 "... returning from the tomb,
 they told all this to the eleven, and to all the rest...
BUT these words seemed to them an idle tale,
 and they did not believe them."
 Using this defiant, little conjunction 6 times in just 12 verses,
 it's as if Luke is trying to stop us in our tracks...
 grab us by the lapels and give us a good shake...
 all so we'll understand
 that no matter what we may have heard,
 we haven't heard the whole story.
 Yes, Joseph of Arimathea
 may have put his lifeless corpse in a tomb...
BUT on the first day of the week, at early dawn...
 he was not there.
 Karl Barth put it this way:
 "The gospel," he said, "is not a natural 'therefore,'
 but a miraculous 'nevertheless.'"
 A miraculous nevertheless.
 And what this means is that:
 "Yea, though you may walk through
 the valley of the shadow of death,
 you need fear no evil...
 for the Good Shepherd is not dead, but alive...
 and is with you..."

his rod and his staff will comfort you.
What this means that with Paul,
you can be ABSOLUTELY CERTAIN
that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor anything else will be able to separate us
from the steadfast love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It means that whatever comes... whatever you are facing...
whatever you have thought to be impossible is NOT –
because with God, all things are possible.

Yes, Easter means there is life on the other side of death.
But it also means there is life on THIS SIDE...
for the God who reached down into that tomb,
lifting Jesus to new life
can reach into the places
where we are dead and dying
and do the same for you and me.

Who knew that this little, three-letter conjunction
could say all that! But it does!

Easter is **God's great "however"...**
God's miraculous "nevertheless."

Luke does this, of course,
because he knows there is one
who is out there spreading another story...
a narrative that ends not with new life
but with the hopeless finality of Good Friday.

This other narrative ends with what is natural... death!
It believes the way things have been
is the way things will always be.

"Oh, he'll never change.
That's just the way it is.
I'm afraid there's no hope."

Trust me, I know this story
because personality-wise, I tend to be a "realist."
Sometimes that helps me,
but other times it doesn't.

You see, realism can easily lead to cynicism...
and if I'm not careful
I can get paralyzed by life's challenges...
I can become passive and accepting, and even hopeless.

It's at those times that I need Luke

to stop me in my tracks...
grab me by my lapels...
and give me a good shake...
and remind me of this defiant and hopeful little conjunction "but."

Resurrection is unnatural, we get that!
To expect a sealed tomb and find one filled with angels...
to hunt for the past and discover the future...
to seek a corpse and find the risen Lord...
none of this is natural.
Yet this unnatural event is very cornerstone of our faith.
A divine intrusion has taken place...
Easter has changed everything!

Tony Campolo tells about the time he attended worship
in an African-American church in West Philadelphia.
You may have heard about this.

It was amazing, Campolo said,
because for a full hour and a half
the preacher preached just ONE LINE over and over.
That line was: ***"It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!"***
As African-American preachers often do,
Tony says he started out the sermon softly:
"It's Friday. It was Friday and Jesus was dead on a tree,
but that was only Friday. Sunday's coming!"
It's Friday. Mary is crying her eyes out
and the disciples are running in every direction,
like sheep without a shepherd.
But that was only Friday. Sunday's coming!"
"It was Friday and the cynics of the world were saying,
'The way things have always been,
that is the way they will always be.
You can't change anything in this world.'
But the cynics didn't know that it was only Friday.
Sunday's coming!"
"It was Friday... and on Friday all the forces
that oppress the poor
and make the weak to suffer
were in control.
But that was only Friday. Sunday's coming!"
"It was Friday and on Friday Pilate thought
he had washed his hands of Jesus,
and the Romans were strutting around
as if they were back in control.

But they didn't know it was only Friday. Sunday's coming!"
And the preacher kept on working that same line
over and over again...
 "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!
 It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!"
Until at the end of his message,
 he just shouted out, "It's Friday...."
And all 500 people shouted in one voice:
 "but Sunday's coming!"

Well, my friends, Sunday is here!
 The tomb is empty!
 Everything has changed!
 Christ is risen!
 Christ is risen, indeed!

Charge and Blessing

Ted Wardlaw tells of the time he invited a preacher from the National Baptist tradition... that's a largely African-American tradition... to preach their annual Good Friday service. Wardlaw loved it because preaching in the black style, this pastor was able to loosen those Presbyterians up... some of them even joining in the call and response preaching. But what he loved most was what the preacher said after he finished reading the crucifixion story which was his text. It was not the usual: "The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God." Instead he said: "May God bless you, and may God protect you from the enemy who would try to steal this word from you." Those words are an appropriate blessing for every time you hear the Word proclaimed, but perhaps on this day in particular. May God bless you, and may God protect you from the enemy who would try to steal this word of hope from you. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.