

“Easter Nonsense”

Luke 24:10-12, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

First Presbyterian Church

February 6, 2022

Luke 24:10-12

Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But 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.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

¹⁵Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. ³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Sermon

I counted it up – I’ve preached 34 Easter Sunday sermons, not counting a good many sunrise services. Looking back, two things I really appreciate about preaching on Easter (in addition to the larger than normal crowds) – one, the chance to hear the story from four different perspectives (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) ... and two, the opportunity each year to notice something new in what is a very familiar story.

Several years back, another preacher brought to my attention a wonderful detail that I had never noticed before in Luke’s account.¹ You may remember that the women who followed Jesus were the first to receive the news that he was risen. The eleven apostles were “hiding out” ... hoping that the ones who got Jesus would not come after them next. So, when the women found the tomb empty... and told the apostles about it... the apostles dismissed the story as an “idle tale.” Hmmm! There’s one translation that is particularly blunt, saying that when the women came with their good news of the empty tomb, the eleven responded, “Nonsense!”

¹ Martin B. Copenhaver, Journal for Preachers, Easter 2007, p. 19

But here's the first wonderful detail I'd missed all these years – it is that immediately after they declared the women's story to be nonsense, Peter jumped up and took off running toward the tomb. Seems funny! Guess he just wanted to check out this nonsense for himself!

Well, I love the juxtaposition of these two reactions – on the one hand you have, “Nonsense!” and on the other you have, “Let's go check it out!” Because to me that says a lot about the mix of disbelief and hope that had to be a part of the first Easter... and is still part of our Easters now. The head may say “Nonsense!” while the heart says “Maybe, just maybe, it's true!”

Friends, if I could channel the Apostle Paul this morning, I believe he would say to us that at the heart of the gospel is a scandalous claim... and that claim is that the ancient God of Israel raised Jesus – a first century Jew – from the dead.

I have shared with you before what the great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, said about what brings people to worship. He said what brings people to worship – and not just on Easter, but any Sunday – is the often-unspoken question: “Is it true?” Is it true that God lives and gives us life? Is it true that God not only established what we call the laws of nature, but that one day God broke those laws and raised Jesus from the dead? Is it true that something so extraordinary happened on that Easter morning that we can base our every morning on its truth?

Such powerful questions... so powerful we can understand why there were some in the Corinthian church who doubted. Why would this God raise the dead? Is that even possible? Couldn't we just see him as a great teacher without talking about resurrection? Make no mistake, the idea that God actually raised someone from the dead was as difficult for these people to believe as it is for us. These ancient folks weren't stupid. They'd seen countless people die and never once had they seen anyone come to life again. Yet, for Paul this was absolutely non-negotiable... this was the foundational event of our faith... and for Paul, there was no good news... no gospel... unless God had raised Jesus from the dead.²

So, to return to Karl Barth's question, “Is it true?” - how can Paul be so rock solid sure? He tells us there are actually two reasons. First, because it was Jesus that appeared to Cephas and the twelve... it was Jesus who appeared to over 500 sisters and brothers... it was Jesus who appeared to James and then to all of the apostles. It wasn't the power of their memory of Jesus overcoming them... it wasn't some generalized sense of the presence of God. It was HIM... it was JESUS in the midst of them in a way that was as real and unimaginable to them as it would be to us.

But even more, Paul could be so sure it was true because this same Jesus had appeared to him. Of all people, Jesus had appeared to him. This is the second detail that I had missed all these years. It comes in verse 8 when he writes: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

² Copenhaver again.

Now, what does he mean when he says he was “untimely born?” It sounds like he’s saying that he was just born at the wrong time — that he was born too late to be among the twelve. But that’s not it... when he says he was “untimely born,” the word he uses means “premature birth” — which in Paul’s world — a world where only half of full-term births reached the age of ten — meant a “preemie” had almost zero chance of survival.³

Friends, Paul realized that he was as good as dead when Christ appeared to him. He was killing the church of God. He was doing everything in his power to put an end to the Jesus movement. He was a murderer and a persecutor and completely unworthy of God’s grace. He was the least likely candidate for God to choose... yet God chose him anyway. It was an experience of such grace and power that it changed his life immediately and for all time.

That’s why Paul will use this entire section of his letter to the Corinthians to remind them of what had been passed down to them... the scandalous claim — that the ancient God of Israel raised Jesus — a first century Jew — from the dead. You see, Christianity isn’t a set of ideas... it isn’t a path of spirituality... it isn’t a rule for living... and it certainly isn’t a political agenda. It touches on all of these things, but at its very core it is something different.⁴ It is good news... good news about an event which has happened in the world... an event so gracious and powerful that the world can never be the same again... because this event revealed that good can dislodge evil... forgiveness is larger than human sin... and that the power of life is ultimately triumphant over the power of death. And Paul’s message is that those who believe it... and those who live by it, will (by the grace of God) never be the same again either.

Introduction to the closing hymn: He Lives

Our closing hymn is one we sang growing up Baptist. It was written by Alfred Henry Ackley, a Presbyterian minister who in 1932 met a Jewish man to whom he began witnessing, but who asked him, “Why would I worship a dead Jew?” Sometime after that, Alfred got up early on Easter morning to prepare his Easter message and while he was shaving, flipped on the radio. He was astonished to hear a famous liberal preacher in NY say, “Good morning! It’s Easter! You know folks, it really doesn’t make any difference to me if Christ be risen or not. As far as I’m concerned, his body could be dust in some Palestinian tomb. The main this is, His truth goes marching on!” Alfred wanted to throw the radio across the room. “It’s a lie,” he exclaimed, as his wife rushed into the bathroom. “Why are you shouting so early in the morning?” she asked. “Didn’t you hear what that good-for-nothing-preacher said?” he replied. Well, that morning he preached with great conviction on the reality of Christ’s resurrection, but that evening he was still upset about his Jewish friend’s question and the morning’s radio sermon. “Listen here, Alfred Ackley,” his wife finally said. “It’s time you did what you can do best. Why don’t you write a song about it and then maybe you’ll feel better.” So, Rev. Ackley opened his Bible and re-read the resurrection account in Mark’s gospel. A thrill went through him as he wrote the words and then the music of what has become one of the church’s most triumphant Easter hymns.⁵

³ Carla Works in her reflection on this passage found at workingpreacher.org.

⁴ Tom Wright in “Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians,” (WJK,2004), p. 206.

⁵ Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul*, (Thomas Nelson,2011), p.290.