

THE GOOD NEWS OF AN IDLE TALE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Easter Sunday, April 8, 2007

Scripture: Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-12

Here we are all dolled up on Easter morning. We've put on our best, our warmest best (as luck would have it), donned a bonnet here and there, maybe gotten the kids new shoes, or a new dress, or a fresh shirt. The men are wearing pink ties today, and yellow, and lavender with no embarrassment. We do this for tradition's sake because today there is a story we remember that bears a truth we *want* to believe, God help us, that love is stronger than hate and life has triumphed over death.

Even the earth has dressed for the occasion. The forsythias with their yellow flowers are screaming resurrection, and jonquils jumping up are singing hallelujah, it's nature's way of rehearsing its great gettin' up morning. If *we* did not come resplendent today, the *earth* would do it for us. There is something in the air that is greater than our skepticism, truer than our doubt, trumping disbelief with hope.

We want to believe this resurrection story, because there is so much that wants to deny it. Richard Dawkins writes **The God Delusion**, a runaway bestseller, imagining a world without religion as a better world indeed. No Crusades, no Inquisition, no persecution of scientists like Galileo. No Israel, no Palestine, no Islam or Judaism or Christianity. The world would be a better place without God, Dawkins argues. And there are some who would agree, at least about the violence done in God's name.

Just in time for Passover this week the *Times* reports there is no archeological evidence for the Red Sea's parting. So much for Judaism and Christianity in one fell swoop. The carbon 14 dating of the Shroud of Turin has been called into question in recent years. And between the DaVinci Code and the latest revelations about the Jesus family tomb, we are not sure whether Mary Magdalene was Jesus' lover, his wife, or just an admiring disciple. It's only a matter of time, in some peoples' minds when the video tapes from the tomb on Easter morning are released, proving the hoax.

We think we are so clever, we moderns, with our radio spectrometers and carbon dating and Buck Rogers decoder rings, debunking the Bible's stories of fantastic Middle Eastern legends and cultural mythologies. As if our superior minds and scientific methodology could answer all the mysteries of life, as to why we are here in the first place, and how it all ends. So we relegate the questions that are beyond our comprehension, like the resurrection, to definable categories, like *parable* as Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have done in their latest book; describing the resurrection as a nice story but not very historical; a good idea, but not really true.

The problem with all these attempts to disprove God and demystify life only proves one thing, that we humans are impatient with insoluble problems. We are nervous about mystery and we do not deal with the proximate very well. Ambiguity is not our strong suit.

In that vein, the gospels should appeal to us more than they do. They are about as truthful as you can get, honest in distinguishing what they know from what they believe.

There is a frankness in Luke's account, for instance, and in the other gospels as well that acknowledges the difficulties in the resurrection narratives.

There are, after all, problems in the details of the stories. The spices and ointments that the women took to the tomb with them that first Easter morning tell us they expected death, not life. They went to the tomb prepared to do for Jesus' body what was the custom of his people, to apply ointments and spices, to hasten the decay, and to sweeten the smell of rotting flesh.

When they got to the tomb and saw the stone had been rolled away, they had to go inside to investigate what had happened. They didn't understand what it was that they were seeing.

When there was no corpse to be found, they were shaken with fear until the two men in dazzling white spoke to them, "Why are you looking for the Living One among the dead?" they asked. It jarred the women out of their disbelief, it was so unexpected, even as the two men explained how everything that had happened, happened as predicted. But still they could not connect the dots!

So the women went to the Twelve and told them what they had seen and heard. And what was the men's reaction? Were they excited, overwhelmed with thanksgiving, spilling over with joy? No! They were utterly underwhelmed! Their reaction was one of disbelief, "These words seemed to them an idle tale," Luke says, "and they did not believe them."

What a letdown. What a colossal, monumental blowout. The biggest news in all of human aspiration, the confirmation of the greatest human hope, and what happens? "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

Almost as an afterthought, Luke mentions that Peter got off his laurels and ran to the tomb to check out the story, and while he reports that Peter was amazed, he also notes that Peter returned home. Evidently Peter could scarcely take it in himself. He simply went back home and flopped down in his easy chair and wondered what earthly sense this all could make.

Now if I had been Peter, I think I would have had a big party that day, an open house, have everybody in, tell all the old stories, maybe set a place for Jesus at the table the way every Jewish home keeps a place set for Elijah at the Passover seder just in case he comes by! Really do it up big in the hope that the first of the resurrection appearances would be at my brunch.

I know, there was that issue about Peter's denials, the unfinished business between Peter and Jesus, but if Jesus could rise from the dead, surely the denials could be forgiven.

I take some comfort in the skepticism of those first disciples who thought the news of the women coming from the tomb was over-the-top. They thought the news of the resurrection an idle tale, and Luke is not embarrassed to tell us that that was the way it sounded to them.

Thank goodness. Not because it reinforces the stereotype of the men's skepticism of the word of women. In 1st Century Palestine a woman's testimony was not admissible

in court. It was considered unreliable, so why should it be otherwise with their comprehension of theological things?

Heaven knows we men are often blind and deaf sometimes, even in the 21st Century discounting the witness of those women in our lives who have much to tell us if we will only have the wit to pay attention. But I suspect there's not only that happening in the story, but also something else, something deeper at work in the disciples' disbelief.

Death, after all, is so powerful and we have seen what it can do. We doubt that any force on earth can overcome the pain it inflicts and the terror it causes. Death comes in like a thief in the night when you least expect, when you're off guard, and unaware, and it respects no one.

It comes in the door and pads into the kitchen in the middle of the afternoon and leaves grandma lying on the floor with a stroke.¹

It tiptoes down the hall to the nursery and suddenly leaves an infant face down in her crib.

It puts on camouflage boots and rides in a Humvee in Baghdad and rips the life away from a nineteen-year-old kid from Brooklyn who joined the Army to get some discipline into his life.

It comes barefoot into the bedroom and in a moment of thoughtlessness is passed from one person to another as a virus that will not go away.

It puts on a blue hospital gown and wears a mask and waits in the corner of the cancer ward for the right moment to take the young mother who sees what he is up to and who fends him off, like a stalker, with everything she has.

We have seen what death can do, with his deadly arrows and sneak attacks. Death darkened our city's sky one bright September morning and we have been haunted by its fallout ever since. War upon war, and threats of war unabated. Prisoners taken and abused, a dictator mocked and hanged, and captives held and beheaded. The number of nuclear nations gets larger each year and the earth warms from the cloud of emissions and global gasses that gather unabated.

I don't care what St. Paul says about death not having any victories. Death has had some monumental victories along the way, the way I see it, some blows that have really hurt us. Death most certainly has its sting, and almost all of us have felt it in one way or another.

But all that being said, death is not all there is. Not by a long shot. For there is a story that comes to us this day in the witness of the women who went to the tomb laden with spices and carrying the ointments, and who returned with a message so brave, a hope so astounding, a truth so deep that we are still trying to take it in; the good news that the Lord is risen. He is risen, indeed!

You know it's really quite fascinating the turnaround that the disciples made. There they were on the night of Jesus arrest in the garden. Their eyes were heavy and they fell asleep. They could not watch for even an hour.

Then came the guards. And the disciples scattered into the night like mice when the lights go on. Judas betrayed him. Peter denied him, all of them scattered. John alone goes to the cross and accompanies Mary on Friday, but the rest of them are nowhere to be found. All of them are AWOL on Saturday. Even after the women have reported the good news of Jesus' resurrection on Easter morning, they are still all holed up in seclusion for fear of their enemies.

But something happened. Something called the resurrection that turned them around, these faithless disciples. Something so powerful, so unexpected, so unlikely that they left their place of hiding, and went into the world and carried with them the good news that they were at first reluctant to believe, news that the Lord had risen, that he had risen indeed.

Maybe the news of the resurrection came to them at first as an idle tale because they wanted it to be so, nothing more than dismissible prattle. Maybe their first reaction was not, "Oh boy!" but "Oh no." For if he was raised from the dead, then their work was not finished, they had to leave their place of hiding and go out into the world, a world that was hostile to their message and bear that unimaginable news into the light. It would have its risks, and who knows what might happen to them? Maybe the same thing that had happened to Jesus. No wonder they greeted the news of his resurrection with skepticism.

That same news pushes us in the same direction. It forces us to realize that this is not some idle tale with which we are involved, it is the power of God set loose in the world and we are meant to take it seriously, to be conduits and expressions of that power, the means of God's love expressed in a world where Christ is risen and goes before us. The implications of that affirmation touch everything. It transforms our lives and it changes our world setting it and us on a new course.

War is now on notice in the resurrection, and peace is given a foothold as the only acceptable way that human beings can live in a common enterprise that must move us closer together. We now know that some day there will be no war, and swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and we shall never study war any more.

In the resurrection the earth is affirmed as the handiwork of God, subject to God's order and design, and we are responsible for its care, preserving its streams, protecting its air, honoring the goodness of it that God declared the first day of all Creation. We know now that the earth shall be fair once again. From a garden we have emerged, and to a garden we shall return.

The poor, in Jesus' lifetime, were seen and heard, the hungry fed, the lonely visited, the lame walked, the blind had their sight restored, the prisoner was set free. Because of the resurrection and its proclamation of God's reign we now know that one day there will be no poverty, no loneliness, no despair, no injustice.

Jesus healed the sick and raised from the dead Jairus' daughter, and Lazarus. He healed a woman with a hemorrhage and cured the insanity of a man among the Gerasenses. He tamed the winds when they were troubled and calmed the sea, and he

quiets the fears of those who trust in him still. Now we know that God's intention is that we should be made whole in body, mind, and spirit.

Jesus faced the cross, the cruelest cut the Roman Empire could administer. He died a painful death, mocked by passers-by, overseen by military power and religious authority, drugged by vinegar and wine, suffering hour upon hour in tortuous agony, his own Abu Ghraib. And now we know that one day there will be no cruelty like that, no suffering or terror at human hands. For the powers of earth in fullest display on that cross have been overthrown by the power of an empty tomb, and so it is this day, that loveless power has succumbed to the power of love.

Maybe it was an idle tale, but if so, we are of all people most to be pitied. I look at this world and what holds it at bay, the wars and rumors of war, the terror and dread that hangs over our time, the cancer and AIDS and suffering, the captives of war and the passions of suicide bombers. And I cannot believe that this is God's intention for us.

I take encouragement from that empty tomb and that empty cross, where the passionate love of God was poured for the sake of the world. And now we know that it is no idle tale, but a love story, a story of God's love for us beyond all imagining.

The question of Easter is not so much that of whether you believe in the resurrection, what happened to the corpse, whence dissolved the molecules of Jesus' body, or whether we can get some accurate carbon dating on that shroud to prove its historicity.

The real question of Easter is how good do you think God is? If God is a good and loving God, who has created the earth and all of us who are in it, who has given us this model for our humanity and this insight into God's nature in Jesus Christ, then we know that God is love and God is good and there is no length to which God would not go for our sake.

The resurrection is only the natural outcome of the goodness of a God who loves us beyond measure and whose passion for us is past our comprehension.

I have good news today. It is no idle tale, but the glorious affirmation of a God who loves and adores us beyond our wildest imagining. With the women at the tomb, our hope, our faith, our confidence today is that the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2007.

¹ Dr. Fred Craddock used similar anthropomorphic images of death and death's foot ware in a sermon delivered at Montreat Conference Center at the Worship and Music Conference some years ago. Though restated in my own words and to situations more contemporary than when I first heard Dr. Craddock speak, I nonetheless owe these images of death's reality to his creative imagination.