

Idle Tales
Easter Sunday March 31, 2013
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Grieving, then perplexed, then terrified, then remembering, then amazed. They really ran through the whole gamut of emotions that morning – those Galileans visiting Jerusalem. And that was before anyone actually saw the risen Jesus. A whole gamut of emotions... except for perhaps, joy or certainty. In fact, the response I am most aware of in this passage is skepticism. The words of the Marys and Joannas and other unnamed women seemed like an idle tale to the disciples in hiding. “Idle tale” is one way of translating the actual Greek word: *leros*. *Leros*, as in delirious, as in “those women are getting hysterical and babbling some crazy stuff.”

Skepticism might not be a bad place for us to start. If we were listening to those Marys and those Joannas that morning 2000 years ago, we would want a more coherent story. We would want more than: we saw him die, we saw his body taken off the cross, we saw it wrapped in linen and put in a rock-hewn tomb, we went home and prepared the burial ointments, we kept the Sabbath, we went back to the tomb, the stone was rolled away, we were perplexed, two strange men spoke to us, we were terrified, the men told us to remember what Jesus said in Galilee, and so we came back here.

“That’s it?” we and the disciples ask. What are we supposed to do with this information? What did those two radiant men mean: he is living, not dead, he is risen? This is completely out of the scope of our experience and our expectations. We need a little more to work with here.

The skepticism of those disciples and our skepticism have different qualities, of course. Ours tends to be based more on a modern understanding of the way the world works: things like medical knowledge, scientific facts. Bodies don’t just disappear overnight. And just because something is gone, doesn’t mean that there has been a resurrection. As one preacher said, “I often lose my car keys. That doesn’t mean they have risen from the dead.”

Out of ancient and modern skepticism have come many theories: Jesus’ own friends removed the body and hid it; Jesus’ enemies raided the tomb and vandalized it; Jesus was not really dead, only in a coma, so he walked off on his own; and (my favorite) the women were lost in the early morning light and actually visiting the wrong tomb. And so we continue to spin idle tales, trying to get a grip on this Easter story, trying not to be fooled, and, perhaps, hoping to believe.

One way we deal with all this confusion is to turn to the natural world, and look for signs of resurrection there. Jesus himself did this, when he said, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” We sing, “Now the Green Blade Rises,” we talk of eggs and butterflies and springtime renewal. And these are beautiful metaphors: I love them. But here is what I notice this time around, reading the Easter story: this is **not** natural. This is **not** the normal cycle of life, something Jesus’ followers could take in stride. It is a shocking and mind-blowing intrusion of divine power into our world. It will not leave us comfortably contemplating the shoots of daffodils appearing in our gardens. The Easter story is much more demanding than that.

Another way that we deal with our confusion is to turn to the afterlife, and say that this story is all about meeting those we love again after they die. It is a sign from God that death is not an ultimate separation, and that we will all be finally united in God's love. With this approach, the gift of Easter is an other-worldly assurance of life beyond death. There is no doubt that the mystery of resurrection includes this beautiful hope: it is no idle tale. But I can't help but feel that limiting the meaning of Easter to life after death keeps the picture too small. Should we allow our contemplation of heavenly joy to obscure the earthly joys and challenges around us? The Easter story is much more demanding than that.

Jesus and his disciples were immersed in Jewish traditions of a creator God whose power was aimed at the whole of creation, not just the souls of the faithful departed. They had read their Scriptures, like the passage from Isaiah that promises a new heaven and a new earth. It is clear from Isaiah's words that God is not done with creation: it is not a finished product just yet. Radical change is needed. We are given a glimpse of the peace and security God intends for all living things, from birth through a long life to a serene death, with productive work and a blessed future. The scope is enormous. And, I would say, the scope demands something of us.

Stories of the new heavens and the new earth, of a crucified man who is risen, ask us, "How will you participate in the new creation? How will you live out a resurrected life?" With those Marys and those Joannas, we remember, we understand anew, the words of Jesus. They and those disciples began, after their initial skepticism, to understand that Jesus' life was an initiation into the new creation, or the Kingdom of God, as he liked to call it. Jesus had been living all along as if the new creation had already arrived.

The first people who heard the confused voices of the women coming back from the tomb were slow to take all this in. Nothing looked different to them. They were still living in fear that the Roman authorities would crucify them as well. The world looked as awful as ever. They needed a bit of time to overcome the surprise of a new direction, to move beyond grief, beyond skepticism, to see where God was calling them.

Clarence Jordan, a 20th century revolutionary pastor, said, "The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a Spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church."

When we hear stories of the new creation, and of the resurrection, we can stay in a place of skepticism and call them idle tales or delirious visions. We can get stuck in worrying about the exact physics of an event 2000 years ago. Or we could consider becoming co-creators with God, a "Spirit-filled fellowship," and live as if strange stories were possible. All I know is, something happened in Jerusalem after the crucifixion, but, as Frederick Buechner would say, "what really matters is not so much what happened there as what happens now."

Here is an idle tale for you: A group of 15 people, mostly from this church, and led by Rita Severinghaus, left the Upper Valley last month and went to a village of 50 families, Las Auyamas, to build a house for a family whose home was about to fall down. Oh, and these 15 people had never built a cinder block house before. Oh, and they brought 20 suitcases full of children's clothing, toiletries, and medical supplies. They were going to have challenges with their own

housing, with heat, with digestion, with managing in a new culture. But they went. And oh, they brought t-shirts and silk-screened them for everyone in the village and did beading projects. And they started on one house for one family. This is beginning to sound a little delirious to me...they were doing **what**? But here's the thing: it was not just the creation of one new house. And it was not just the normal run of things in this village: the natural cycle of life. And it was not an attempt to speak to people about the well-being of their souls and the preparation for the afterlife. In a partnership with divine power, they reached beyond the walls of a single cement-block house. Things began to shift in that village: a sort of ripple effect. People were inspired to start work on other houses. The woman with the new house is going to pass her good fortune along. She is getting a loan from the bank to open a vegetable stand. A women's club was resurrected in the village: the community saw the value of working together in new ways. When the Lions Club of a nearby town learned about the donations of medical supplies, they organized a Saturday morning health clinic with eight doctors. There was an explosion of energy.

I want to hear more idle tales, more unbelievable stories like this one. Because each one is a sign of resurrection, each one gives a glimpse of the new earth that rises beautifully in the mind of God. They sound a bit crazy, and maybe we babble a little. That's all right. I'll stick with Mary, and Mary, and Joanna and Rita and those other women. They're on to something.

I close with the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who lived through incredibly violent and troubled times and still clung to the truth of new life rising out of the past. He said, in the face of injustice and calamity:

*Goodness is stronger than evil, Love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death;
Victory is ours, Victory is ours
through God who loves us.
Amen.*