

April 4, 2010

Easter Vigil, Year C

Luke 24:1-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

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They were hiding and afraid, weary and broken, defeated. And then here come the women, the Marys and the others, breathless and confused, all talking at once, telling the faithful remnant what they had seen.

He was gone! Just like he said he would be! The shroud was still there but his beloved body was gone!

And furthermore, there were angels, at least they thought they were angels.

But these words seemed to them an idle tale, says our Gospel, and they did not believe them.

Can you blame them? Of course it seemed an idle tale. A big fish story is more like it.

That rock was huge! No one could move it alone, especially a recently dead person. A couple of guys in dazzling clothes? He's alive? What? No way!

And moreover, those telling the tale were women. And everyone knows that women aren't trustworthy. Prone to exaggeration, they are. People don't just up and rise from the dead. Please.

We have been waiting for this good news. We, 2000 years later, have been waiting expectantly like we do every year to hear the news that we know is coming. ALLELUIA! The tomb is empty and now that death is conquered, anything is possible! ALLELUIA! We should be, by all rights, mad with joy to hear this news, as crazy as the first time we heard it, and crazy every time we hear it hereafter.

But without 2000 years of this shared story behind them, our burnt-out disciples aren't even curious. They are just tired. The idle tale told by the frenzied women doesn't make a dent in their exhaustion. Peter, the teacher's pet, runs off to see for himself, possibly out of guilt, possibly because he always needs to be right. But otherwise, our story ends with the jaded, tired apostles denying the feasibility of what they've heard.

No, he's not risen. He's dead. Evil has won. Weep for your children, women, because what you are saying is impossible.

The fact that you are here this morning at this ungodly hour to celebrate together tells me that you know that this is indeed not an idle tale. Easter is more than dazzling flowers and gorgeous music. It is more than prayers, more than Eucharist, more than community and certainly more than bunnies or chocolate eggs.

This is not an idle tale. This is not Aesop or Grimm or even Disney, something designed to give us a warm feeling for a little while, or written as a cautionary message to children.

This tale is more, even, than the sum of its parts. The meaning of what we have heard, that he is gone, is world-changing and history-shifting.

There is nothing idle about this tale.

This is Good News. This is Gospel.

This tale tells us that the tomb is empty, that death is conquered, that sin no longer holds sway over us, that grace abounds. This story tells us that earthly rulers and principalities may have the power to break our bones, to mock us, to beat us. But they cannot kill us.

Death no longer ends *our* story. *This* story assures of us that.

This is certainly not an idle tale.

But sometimes, often, I'd say, we treat it like it is an idle tale, like belief is a choice or something we can turn on and off when needed, like a flashlight. We often live our lives in a way that does not reflect back the power of this truth.

We do not live every day in a way that shows the world and shows ourselves that we believe in the scandal of that empty tomb.

Because that is what it is: a scandal. A scandal signifying to us what Isaiah prophesied all along: that God has brought forth a new thing, that God is trustworthy, that God is powerful and mighty, defeating even death.

At our baptisms, we were asked (or someone was asked on our behalf) the "questions of promise." We heard them again this morning:

1. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
2. Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

3. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
4. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
5. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

If you have taken Lent seriously this year, as I know many of you have, you have likely spent some time in self examination. Not an easy task. If you are human, Lent or no, you know how you have failed yourself, how you have failed those you love. You know how you have fallen short of belovedness. You know how you have neglected your baptismal vows, to eschew evil, to serve Christ in others, to proclaim the Good News.

But if you believe, as I do, that this is not an idle tale, if you believe, then you can start again, this happy morning, to put that belief to work, to live like you mean it. To live in a way that not only honors that empty tomb but proclaims it in thought, word and deed.

And before you leave this place this morning, if you know that this is not an idle tale, you have even another opportunity, to lay your inadequacies, your shortcomings, your sins and your failures at the foot of the empty cross and leave them there. You can fill that empty tomb with everything that needs to die in your life.

And then go out into the world believing you can be the child of God that you were indeed created to be.

The women knew that they were telling the truth. Peter, in his curiosity, learned it, too. After 2000 years of hearing this story, we know, too that this is not a fairy tale, this is good news for all: the tomb is empty, death is conquered, the Lord is risen indeed.

Alleluia.