

“The Idlest Tale”

A sermon for the Congregational Church of Salisbury
Salisbury, Connecticut

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Texts: Luke 24:1-12

Fair warning, now. Maybe you think you know what you're getting on this day of resurrection, but this story takes place beyond anything you and I know. It is wild. Strange. Irrational. Exhilarating. Perplexing. Not made to fit inside a human brain or be captured by our firing synapses. Hang onto your Easter bonnets — we're in resurrection time!

^{24:1} But on the first day of the week, at early dawn,
they came to the tomb,
taking the spices that they had prepared.

² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

³ but when they went in,
they did not find the body.

⁴ While they were perplexed about this,
suddenly
two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Remember how he told you,
while he was still in Galilee,
⁷ that the [Human One]
must be handed over to sinners,
and be crucified,
and on the third day rise again."

⁸ Then they remembered his words,
⁹ and returning from the tomb,
they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James,
and the other women with them
who told this to the apostles.

¹¹ But these words seemed to them
an idle tale,
and they did not believe them.

¹² 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.

1

It began at early dawn — light just barely showing the outline of houses, the borders of the path they walked on.

It began with burial spices — myrrh, aloe — and the grieving that goes along with obtaining the spices, carrying them, mentally preparing to anoint the dead body of their beloved teacher, as they walked in the thin morning light.

It began as the women went to the grave — and in place of the body of their beloved Jesus found an empty tomb.

Two strange men in strangely brilliant tunics ask the women, Why do you look for the living among the dead?

Maybe the women thought, “Is that a trick question?”

Maybe they thought, “Why are we looking for the living among the dead? We saw him, dead. Death is what we know; death is what we prepared for. This scene, right now — this is beyond anything we’ve known.”

It is worth remembering that Easter morning began with a sight so inexplicable, so beyond every category of knowing, that St. Luke described the first witnesses as perplexed and terrified.

Easter is a whole new category. It won’t fit into things we already know and recognize.

Easter will not be tamed: it is wild with the mysterious power of God’s own self.

2

Easter comes around the time that many plants are coming out of winter dormancy and showing signs of new life — but Easter is not about the seasonal regeneration of crocuses and daffodils and star magnolias. It’s deeper than that.

Easter has to do with new life — and we see parallels with chicks breaking out of eggs, lambs and litters of bunnies — but the resurrection has nothing to do with reproduction. It’s bigger than that.

Easter brings to mind the stunning transformation from caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly — which is amazing to witness — but Easter belongs to a universe beyond biology.

Easter does not fit into any concept or idea or process that we already know. The laws of nature mean nothing to an event that upsets every expectation and introduces a whole new reality — a heavenly realm. To paraphrase a favorite poet, The reality of resurrection

... is what will strike you as really absurd;
Unless you are certain you are dreaming, it is certainly a dream of your own;
Unless you exclaim — "There must be some mistake" — you must be mistaken.

Maybe they thought they were dreaming or mistaken, those first witnesses. They went to tell the men. At this point the women were the only human beings in all creation who knew. Which is worth emphasizing, since 2,000 years later, women are still telling truths that get little notice, and too many men still pay far too little attention to women’s ways of knowing.

The women went tell the disciples — and the disciples thought it was an idle tale.

An idle tale.

Idle, meaning not worthy of serious attention. Tale, meaning a second-class truth.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, and other women with them told the guys what they had witnessed, but guys being guys, they thought they knew better. Let this gospel be a warning to us who close our minds to what we do not understand and dismiss it as an idle tale, because we think we know better.

Years ago my family spent a summer vacation in Europe, which included a trip through the Alps in our new VW Microbus. Tim, the youngest, 7-years old, had an aptitude for things mechanical and promptly read the owner's manual. Cover to cover. He methodically made his way through the pages, identifying every part that he could see and its significance in the vehicle's operation. But when he informed us that the brake fluid was too low and we should not go anywhere — it seemed to our parents, and to Tim's three older siblings, an idle tale.

Tim insisted: it wasn't safe for us to go.

Fine, said our parents, we'll go on to the next town and find our hotel and then get it checked.

No, said Tim: I'm not getting in the microbus because it isn't safe. It seemed to everyone but Tim, an idle tale.

You might be thinking, "just put the kid in the car and go," but you don't know just how obdurate that particular kid could be. So my parents found a mechanic — who confirmed that the brake fluid was dangerously low and we could have been in real trouble on those alpine roads.

For many, many miles, through multiple countries, my younger brother reminded us that he had saved all our lives. It had seemed to us an idle tale. But a precocious 7-year old who liked to read technical manuals knew better.

3

It had seemed to the disciples that the women brought them an idle tale. An empty tomb? Strange messengers in dazzling clothes? No, we don't think so.

We know better, now: it's plain just how wrong the disciples were. But let's not be too quick to judge them. After all, they had been through a lot. Weeks and months of ministry, following Jesus, the heady excitement of accepting him as the Messiah of God, the terror and the agony when the political and religious leaders lined up against him — oh, yes, the disciples had been through a lot. They already had their minds changed multiple times. The news that the women brought was maybe one impossible thing too many.

Let's not be too quick to judge — because I suspect that you and I have also on occasion dismissed a true witness as an idle tale. It happens.

Maybe we said "idle tale" when our children gave us a story that seemed outlandish, and we were not ready to perceive that they had something to teach us, to tell us, to show us: that they had a knowledge that we did not. After all, it wouldn't be the first time they tried to get out of homework. So a youngster has just witnessed a world-shaking event, and come home to tell. But to us adults it can seem like an idle tale.

Maybe you and I would have said “idle tale” when Copernicus insisted that we were not at the center of the universe, or when Rosalind Franklin first photographed the winding double helix of DNA, or when Jocelyn Bell Burnell discovered pulsars, or when any number of creative geniuses changed the way we see the universe and our place in it. Too much, too strange, too new; it can seem an idle tale.

Maybe we said “idle tale” when our neighbors with skin as dark as Jesus and his friends said, “Hey, there’s a problem here: my people are hurting, dying.” Maybe we said “idle tale” to the reports that the glaciers are disappearing, that human beings are being trafficked, our water is poisoned, native land is stolen, and too many are hurting with no hope of justice.

Maybe we said “idle tale” when the gospels told about God reaching into the place where death got hold of you, and began lifting you to life.

4

On Easter morning, what seemed like an idle tale was in fact telling the deepest, best truth. A life-giving truth.

Easter comes along with a tale that is anything but idle: amazing beyond words, life-transforming! It is still a tale — because this truth can’t be contained by the smallness of mere fact.

God’s own self — the mystery of wholeness, harmony, justice, and joy — faced down all the powers of sin and death. God’s own self chose to die on a cross rather than compromise the gift of love.

All the facts and figures stated that death should have carried the day.

All the powers and principalities believed that an irksome troublemaker had been silenced at last.

Even the disciples had lost hope.

Except for this idle tale.

5

They say the shortest distance between two people — is a story. This story of life that defeats death, which seemed so recently to be no more than an idle tale, is the shortest distance between heaven and earth. In fact, there’s no distance at all anymore. Heaven and earth have touched, they have melded, they have molded into one in the person of the risen Christ!

The loveless powers that deal in death and discord and denigration and discrimination and denial have lost the day — shoot, they’ve lost the eternity! The seemingly powerless love of a seemingly idle tale has brought holiness to humanity and heaven to earth!

Christ is risen!

Watch out now, when you start thinking “Yeah, that’s an idle tale.” Because Christ has risen, and our story is being re-written.

In case this is the first idle tale you have ever heard from a pulpit — and just in case this is the last idle tale you will ever hear — heaven is on earth! Christ is risen! Alleluia!