

An Idle Tale

TEXT: Luke 24:1-35

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 9, 2023 (Easter)

Usually I offer a lot of context for the Scripture reading. Today I'm offering context for the sermon itself, which was originally delivered on my second Easter in ministry, in Cross City, Florida in 1996.

Nationally, Bill Clinton was president. Republicans had just gained control of the house in the 1994 midterms with Newt Gingrich as Speaker of the House. There had not yet been 9/11. We were not at war in Afghanistan or Iraq. Vietnam was over; the Berlin wall had come down and the Soviet Union had dissolved a mere five years earlier. Boris Yeltsin was President of Russia.

Locally, Cross City was, and is, the county seat for Dixie County, Florida. The average household income at the time was \$15,000/year. Dixie County ranked nationally in two areas: It was the ninth worst educational system in the country and in the top ten for cases of AIDS per capita. Within Florida it was at the top or close to it for teen pregnancy, illiteracy, and many other social ills. The population was about 2,200 served by about 42 churches.

In the church, I had to provide childcare for our youth group because so many of our kids had babies. Many in the group, as well as a number of adults, had rap sheets. Politically they were Dixiecrats; as was everyone in the town. If you registered as a Republican, the town clerk would—unasked, as a service—change your registration for you. Today it is Trump country. They did not believe that getting a divorced, Yankee woman from a liberal seminary as their pastor was God's will. Although they got over it.

So, when I went rummaging about to see what I might say about Easter, here in year 29 of my ministry, I did not expect to find anything that I said in Cross City, Florida in the mid-1990's to be relevant to people in Winchester, Massachusetts in 2023. When I have looked back to themes for sermon fodder from only five years ago, I have had to change almost the whole thing.

But the report in Luke that the disciples dismissed the witness of the women as an "idle tale" jumped out at me again, as it did back then, so I went and looked at what I had said.

First I thought I would at least have to change the references to contemporary events; but when I realized all I would have to do is change the names and locations, it struck me that—like the Easter message itself—things had not really changed. So, I left the original references to help make that point.

The result was that, this morning, you will hear a sermon from 36-year-old me, on my second Easter, at First United Methodist Church in Cross City, Florida. I invite you to listen for what has changed and what has not and how—for all the differences in time and place—our struggles as human beings and our need for the hope this day brings—are everywhere the same.

From April 7, 1996:

Last Sunday afternoon, I made a terrible mistake. Feeling out of touch with the world, I decided to catch up on the news—reading the stack of newspapers I had been neglecting, reading my Time magazine, turning on Headline News. I read an essay on the massacre of those beautiful kindergarten children in Dunblane, Scotland and looked again at their class picture.

I read about the Special Education teacher who was taken hostage because a 17-year-old wanted her car for his birthday. I read how she turned on a little tape recorder in her purse and recorded her conversation with her abductor, trying to convince him to just take the car and not her life, talking about her family and his. And I read how they found the tape when they found her body thrown along the side of the road.

I read with disbelief that the House voted to repeal the ban on assault weapons—I'm sorry if I offend you here, folks, but if you need an uzi to kill deer, you'd better go back to target practice. And then, as I was worried about assault weapons, I read about Ghaddafi's new chemical weapons plant, deep in the mountains of Libya, and our own government's admission that it will most likely be operational in the next few years—that all of our modern technology can't stop it.

I read all of that and got depressed. We live in a world of random violence, where weapons of mass destruction are in the hands of brutes with no conscience and a lust for power. It's a world where we are so intent on having whatever we want, whenever we want it, that we are willing to put the lives of others at risk, or even to take the lives of others in exchange for our own gratification.

As I thought about the evil reaching its icy hand into more and more parts of our nation and our world, Easter seemed remote. I began to think about this Easter morning and the daunting task of proclaiming the Easter message to people who could all be blown up tomorrow by a madman half a world away. In the midst of the dangers and fears and jaded sarcasm of our world, the Easter story would seem just an idle tale; and yet there were a whole lot of people who would be planning to come and hear it. How could I make it live?

Well, the news was making me too depressed to do anything, so I tried to get my mind off of the news out there, and focus on the people in the congregation. I got out the directory, went down the list of names and prayed for each one according to the needs I was aware of. This was much worse than the world news.

In almost every home there was struggle and pain. There was death and illness and stress and burnout and divorce and fear and hurt. There was incredible loneliness for some, and others who had no idea how they would meet their bills and were already far behind. There were those who were frustrated, those whose families were alienated or fighting, and those who felt lost, without anchor or mooring in life's storms. There was anxiety about the future, guilt over the past, and a completely overwhelming present for the vast number of people in the congregation. Living in this world today takes its toll.

Now I was really depressed, and by the time I finished the list, tears were streaming down my face. These were the lives who would struggle out of bed Easter Sunday morning to come to church, looking for something to hang on to—something to get them through. How could a mass telling of a 2,000-year-old story even begin to meet the need? How could I preach Easter, today, now, in this place and time, and make it relevant to the people who would come to hear—people who were tired, broken, hurting, and struggling to find God in the midst of it all?

I cried for a while longer, sat quietly for a while, and then opened my Bible to the resurrection story in Luke. Depressed or not, I had to say something come Sunday morning, so I read the familiar story again. I came to verse 10 and following: "Now, it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

I felt a bit of comfort. I was not the first one to deal with this problem. When the women came back from the tomb with their news and told the disciples, the disciples didn't believe them. They thought it was an idle tale. The very first Easter sermon was a flop. The disciples didn't hear anything more than just a story—an idle tale—probably for many of the same reasons that people don't hear it today.

When that very first Easter happened two thousand years ago, the disciples of Jesus were also hanging on for dear life. The Friday of the crucifixion was not yet called "Good" Friday. The disciples were hiding out. The man they had devoted their lives to following, the man they had given up everything for, had been arrested and killed as a common criminal. They had fled at the arrest of Jesus, and were now afraid for their lives. One of their number had already committed suicide. They were confused, guilt-ridden, frightened, and stressed out.

The world around them was not much better, and as I thought about it, our situation didn't seem so unique anymore. Violence was certainly random for them in an occupied country. I thought about Dunblane, Scotland and then remembered that Roman soldiers had killed all the male children under two in Bethlehem, and soldiers could do what they pleased with the people they encountered.

Every day in Jesus' time you could see people being crucified along the city streets, with the crosses down low enough so that passersby could spit on the dying or laugh in their faces. Corruption was rampant, within the

religious establishment and without. The government operated on bribes and a non-Roman life was snuffed out without a thought.

Each of the disciples was going through a terrible time of personal uncertainty and fear and stress in a random and violent world. Would they be next? And then there was Peter. Peter was perhaps the most miserable of them all. Peter, who had boldly declared that he would die with Jesus, had found when push came to shove, that he couldn't even admit to knowing the man. Three times, Peter had denied any association with the man he had once proclaimed to be the Christ, the son of the living God.

And now that man, the man he had left everything to follow, that Christ, was dead and buried. Maybe if he had stuck by him—maybe it would have been different if they hadn't been such cowards. Maybe if they had stayed and fought for him. Peter had guilt by the truckload, sorrow, remorse, fear for this life, no purpose for his existence.

The audience for the first Easter sermon was in much the same condition as those who come to listen today. And the first Easter sermon given by the women to the disciples was pretty much a washout. The women come from the tomb and tell the disciples that the grave is empty and that angels have told them that Jesus is risen... "But these words seemed to them an idle tale."

I pointed this passage out to God, just in case God had forgotten it. "They don't believe it, God. It's an idle tale. Oh, they might kind of believe it in the way they believe that somebody once built pyramids in Egypt, but not in a way that makes any difference in their lives. America is a jaded nation, God. We're skeptical of everything, and Joe Blow in the pew no more thinks that the Easter story has anything to do with him than that the government is going to cut his taxes.

If Mary Magdalene, fresh from the tomb and angels and all that couldn't convince the disciples—the people who walked and talked with Jesus, who saw his miracles, and who heard him predict this very thing—if THEY thought it was an idle tale, how on earth do you expect people to believe it now?"

I figured I had God this time, it was a pretty good argument. But God sent me back to verse 12. Yes, the disciples thought it was an idle tale. BUT PETER—But Peter got up and ran to the tomb. The sermon was not a complete flop. Peter, perhaps the one who needed to hear the news most, got up and ran to the tomb. There was one in the group who was at least willing to consider the possibility, and just the possibility that it might be true stirred such a hope in Peter that he got up and ran to see for himself.

What I wanted from God, what I kept looking for this week, was some kind of new approach, some kind of trick of the trade or new kind of sermon style that would somehow address the concerns of the day—something that would be a key to open up Easter in a new way for people in such difficult circumstances.

But God stubbornly refused to give me a gimmick. No cute illustrations or probing insights; nothing but the Word of God to be told today as it was told back then. The tomb is empty. He is risen from the dead. God's Word is enough. It is enough to tell the story, to proclaim everywhere and to everyone that the tomb is empty, and there were angels, and the stone was rolled away. He is not dead anymore. He is risen. Somehow or other, Jesus who died and was buried is now alive, never to die again.

That's the message. To many it may be an idle tale. But I can't let that keep me from bringing the message, any more than Mary and the other women could keep the news to themselves. It is incomprehensible—it seems like nonsense. Nothing like it has ever happened before or since, and even the unscientific, superstitious minds of the first century knew that people don't rise from the dead. And yet we proclaim that it is the truth; that it is the Word of God—the Word of God made flesh.

We know from the reaction of Jesus' own disciples that most people who hear the story will think it is an idle tale, or perhaps a myth with some spiritual insight. But, there is perhaps one who needs to hear the message as badly as Peter did that Easter morning. There may be just one person who has their fears and pain

interrupted for just long enough to hear—He is risen—It has happened—Can it be? And in that brief instant, hope is reborn and all the glorious possibilities of the world open up. He is risen from the dead.

Why if it's true—if Jesus is risen—well, then, death is beaten! If Jesus is risen, if it's true; then he is here. He is alive. He can help me. I don't have to be lost. I am not alone. If Jesus is risen, I don't have to wander aimlessly—I have a purpose again. I can go with him again wherever he goes and can find him anywhere and everywhere. And if he's beaten death, then I don't have to worry about dying either. Sure, I might end up dead and in the ground, but I'll rise again with his help. If Jesus is truly risen; I am saved.

Many, if not most, of my friends growing up thought the story of the resurrection was an idle tale. And now as they go through their lives, I can often see Christ walking with them, explaining the Scriptures to them along the road. But, just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they still don't recognize the Lord in their midst. Even when he says, "See here, it's me!" they doubt and question. "Oh, yeah? Where are the nail holes? Prove yourself."

I have always needed Jesus too much to doubt the story. I didn't need a dead teacher; I needed a living Savior. So, when I heard the news, I ran to the tomb; and I found it just as they had said. He is risen, and nothing else has ever truly mattered since. Because Jesus is risen and lives still today, all the evil in this world, all the pain and hurt and fear that comes my way is already beaten. Evil can still fight—I can still be attacked and hurt. I could be gunned down tomorrow; but it can't win. He is risen. The tomb is empty.

On this Easter, just as two thousand years ago, a woman comes to you with a message that Christ is risen from the dead. I bring you word that the tomb is empty and Jesus lives. When the disciples finally believed it; it didn't stop the violence and hatred in their world. They continued to live in a dangerous place. When the disciples finally believed, it didn't free them from personal pain and suffering. All the disciples but John met with a violent death, after lives full of beatings, imprisonments, poverty, and hardships.

But when the disciples finally believed, the pain and suffering in their lives didn't matter anymore. It could no longer break them; in fact, it made them stronger. It touched their bodies, but it no longer weighed upon their souls. Christ was risen, and by his power they would rise again with him to eternal life. They were, in the word's broadest meaning, free.

I can't explain that in twenty minutes on Easter morning. But God has not asked me to explain it. God has asked me to bring you the message. The tomb is empty. Jesus is risen from the dead. If you will dare to even consider the message; if you will allow the hope that Jesus lives to have a place in your soul; get up and run to the tomb. Search every hill and every valley until you find him and your heart will no longer need any proof or explanation. He is risen. There is no other message. Amen.