

# *From Idle Tale to Living Faith*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup>They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup>but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup>While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup>that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

<sup>8</sup>Then they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup>and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup>Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup>But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup>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.

#### Acts 10:34-44

<sup>34</sup>Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup>but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup>You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup>That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: <sup>38</sup>how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup>We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; <sup>40</sup>but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, <sup>41</sup>not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup>He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup>All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

When the Cathedral of Notre Dame was burning on Monday, it was like watching an old and precious friend pass away. I was twenty years old when I first stepped inside, traveling through Paris on my way to spend a Junior Year Abroad at the University of Montpellier in southern France. I still remember how the light coming through those stunning Rose Windows lifted my face heavenward and took my breath away. Just a couple of years ago, at the end of our younger son's semester abroad, the place we wanted to take our boys in all of Europe was to Paris. I have pictures of James and Winston inside Notre Dame's vaulted nave their heads raised to those same Rose Windows I had admired so long before.

Over the course of this Holy Week we have heard countless people reflect on why the world seemed to stop and mourn as we watched the burning of Notre Dame, and I have found myself wondering why my own grief was so palpable. Art historians, religious leaders and various others have talked about how Notre Dame not only represents the religious center of France and the best of Gothic architecture but also the place where, as Jeff Brillhart reminded me, polyphonic music was first composed, with lines written for different voices to sing in four-part harmony.

As many have noted this week, that fire seemed to be burning up some of the most glorious aspirations of civilization. But today, on Easter Sunday, we can point to an even greater significance of all that Notre Dame Cathedral represents, and that is since 1160, its inspiration is founded upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the person of Jesus, God did something so extraordinary that it cannot be captured by words alone – it takes art and architecture, centuries of witnesses passing along the story in word and deed, stained glass and music and their soaring beauty to point to Easter's inexpressible hope and joy.

Even the Bible cannot tell the story using words alone; the four gospel writers each tell the tale of Easter differently. Of course there are some common denominators: the empty tomb, the linen cloths pushed aside, the angel messengers – but the rest of the details vary depending on whether Matthew or Mark, Luke or John is doing the telling. As much as the others,

today's reading from Luke makes one thing abundantly clear: the good news of resurrection transcends mere descriptors. Words alone cannot carry the day – all of our senses are needed to absorb this thing that has taken place: We see darkness is slowly penetrated by the light of dawn and messengers in dazzling clothes; the smell of spices is in the air; the body the women expected to touch is missing; we hear the disciples dismiss the women's testimony as an idle tale, and we picture the rhythm of Peter's running feet and amazement. The Easter story cannot be fully expressed in words... it requires all of our senses – to even begin to imagine that God has the power to raise Jesus from the dead, giving us hope and courage to live in the stunning light of resurrection.

Last Monday night on the PBS NewsHour, Judy Woodruff interviewed the art historian, Elizabeth Lev, about what Notre Dame has meant historically and why its burning was so devastating. At the end of the interview, Woodruff asked: "Is there anything, Elizabeth Lev, we can compare this to, if what we think is lost here, may be lost?" The academic responded: "There is actually a very interesting comparison," and she told a story about another devastating fire of a Fourth Century church, St. Paul's, outside of Rome that burned in 1823. She said, "An amazing thing happened. The entire world in 1823 began to contribute and to help. They sent architects, and they sent money, and they sent materials. And that church was reborn. It's now considered one of our most beautiful churches in the city of Rome. So I think," she went on, "that even though this is a devastating moment for that link with the ancient history of Notre Dame, we also have the opportunity of seeing a great new moment of people coming together, which, believe it or not, that's what the word "*Church*" means, people gathered together. We have a great opportunity to see people gathering together and see if we can bring that church back to a new life."<sup>1</sup>

Easter, likewise, began in devastation – but it continues to gather people together for the good. Jesus was dead; the women and the disciples had seen it happen. They had witnessed the mounting tension as Jesus tried to turn the world of violence and retribution upside down with grace and mercy. They

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<sup>1</sup> pbs.newshour/judywoodruff, 4/15/19.

had seen how the authorities began to feel threatened and then plotted to do away with Jesus. They had stood to watch from a distance as Jesus suffered the cruelest, most humiliating form of execution the Romans could dream up. They had observed Joseph of Arimathea take his body down from the cross, wrap it in a linen cloth, and lay it in the tomb.

Then, defying all their dismay, their dashed hopes, their broken dreams - what happened on that first Easter morning was remarkable, if initially chaotic, the gathering together of people who gave life to the church. The women go to tell the disciples what they had experienced at the tomb. As if to say, “These were not just any women,” Luke lets us know, these were Jesus’ inner circle of women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James. These were women important enough to be named in a gospel that does not often call women by their names. These were believable women, Luke is saying, close friends and followers of Jesus. Nonetheless, the disciples brushed aside their excited whispers of resurrection as an idle tale, and dismissed their words as useless rumor.

If you ever find yourself having a difficult time trying to assimilate the idea of resurrection into your own experience of faith, then you are in good company here, because those who were there when it happened didn’t believe it either – that is at first. What is clear in Luke’s account is that faith in the resurrection is no instantaneous, lightning bolt conversion kind of belief. Nor is it something that can be explained by mere words – no matter how powerful the testimony. Rather, faith in the resurrection comes through confusion and perplexity; through pangs of sorrow until a peace settles in; it is jogged by a memory of something once said, it comes over us slowly as the darkness of dawn gives way to light. And when that light, finally, begins to dawn on us and we trust the Easter story to be believable and true, something astounding begins to happen. The news of resurrection, first encountered through perplexity and dismissed as an idle tale, ultimately gives way to a power unleashed among the disciples themselves.

Luke, after all, is the only gospel writer who gives us a sequel in the Acts of the Apostles to show us how, growing out of initial disbelief – the

resurrection of Christ empowered the people to live the faith that Jesus had inspired in them. The Book of Acts records that in due time the resurrection took hold of the disciples, and they began to do the things that Jesus did. Just as Jesus once called them to follow him, they began to call followers of Christ; just as Jesus had healed, they began to perform miracles of healing; they themselves began to preach and to teach; they shared their goods in common, and they gave everything they could to the poor. As Peter preaches in our reading from Acts this morning about the Risen Christ: “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead... everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” By the power of the Risen Christ in their midst what began as mere rumor of an idle tale became a living faith that permeated every aspect of their lives. C.S. Lewis once said, “I believe in Christianity, as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”<sup>2</sup>

You know, there is not one account in all of the New Testament saying the women, or the disciples for that matter, returned to the empty tomb for more proof that Jesus was raised from the dead. No, they began to believe in the resurrection – not because they saw it, but because by it they began to see everything else. During supper in Emmaus in the breaking of the bread they saw communion with the Living Christ. They saw, in the company of one another, the early church; and together they began baptizing newcomers and welcoming all kinds of people in. They found in themselves the power of the Risen Christ to teach, and to heal, and to speak the word of God’s love and forgiveness with boldness. Theologian Tom Currie has written: “There is simply no telling the story of Easter apart from the community of faith that the Risen Lord engenders. The Easter story astonishes in no small part because it has so little to do with Jesus alone, and so much to do with those whom the risen Lord insists on pulling into this mysterious event.”<sup>3</sup>

This Easter day, we are being pulled into this mysterious event of resurrection, that cannot be fully expressed with words. We celebrate it with

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” from *The Weight of Glory*

<sup>3</sup> Tom Currie, “Preaching Resurrection,” *Journal for Preachers*, 2015.

art and architecture, with stained glass and music and generations of countless witnesses who have lived the faith in word and deed. A lot of lovely stories will emerge from the events surrounding the burning of Notre Dame. But one of them – seems to connect the way this Easter story comes to life among the human community. While the roof was still a crackling inferno overhead, in order to save artwork and priceless religious relics, a human chain took shape. City workers, church caretakers, firefighters and the fire department’s chaplain formed a human chain to help rescue the church’s treasures. <sup>4</sup>

Today, by the power of God to raise Jesus from the dead, we ourselves have been made links in a human chain, from generation to generation, gathered together to be the church, to reach and to help, to serve and to rescue those whom Jesus himself treasured – the least and the lost, the poor and the outcast. We have been gathered together to be the church using all of our senses to live the good news of this Easter story.

AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> James McAuley, “Inside the Notre Dame Cathedral” on April 16, 2019. Washingtonpost.com