

An Idle Tale?

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12

There is a message going round social media at the moment that if we were to be absolutely and literally true to the Easter story, only women should preach on Easter Sunday morning. I could have had a Sunday off!

It is based on the fact that the first humans to encounter the risen Lord Jesus were women: Mary Magdalen, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. Other women are mentioned in other gospels. They were the first people to meet the risen Jesus, and then bring the news to the others.

Initially nobody believed them. What, why, and how would have been in the minds of everyone. Some scholars suggest in first century Palestine, as in common with much of the ancient world, the testimony of women was rarely considered important or binding. That being said, I don't think that anyone, woman or man, coming with such a story, would have been believed. It was surely an idle tale, wishful thinking, a refusal to accept the finality of death.

"In the process of losing his faith, a pastor in John Updike's novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, ponders death and resurrection:

What did it all amount to but the paper-thin difference between death as the end of it all, no worse than a long untroubled sleep, the end of desire as well as capability; and death as the beginning of fresh adventures, a life beyond imagining, full in God's sight, and grotesque to picture - the scramble of Resurrection, the open-mouthed monotony of eternal choral praise? For most (people) this was all religion was, this gamble at the back of their minds, with little to lose but an hour or so on Sunday mornings.ⁱ

And a happy Easter to you too!

But then, somehow, singly, and in crowds, on that first Easter, people began to experience the story and the presence of the risen Jesus. The mystery remained, but the experience of Jesus transformed lives, attitudes and reality. People were moved and inspired to do something about

what they grew to believe. It was no idle tale. Something in their lives had shifted and changed. Something about how they viewed the world had shifted and changed. “The Church from the beginning has refused to allow resurrection to be interpreted in terms totally subjective. Matters of faith are never finally *proven*, nor faith generated by an incontrovertible argument. Faith is communicated by witness.”ⁱⁱ The women had seen something. And what they had seen was that the tomb was empty. Something had happened. Jesus, not dead, was experienced. Something had changed. Not an idle tale, but life!

The women were challenged not to look for the living amongst the dead. In our day why do we look for the living among the dead? Why do we look for life among the deadly bigotries and fatal attractions? Why do we look for life among the poisonous cynicism, toxic worry, and unchangeable past mistakes?

Last week something terrible happened in news so big it blew Brexit off the headlines. The burning of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was heart-wrenching to watch. On the Monday night many held their breath. Small groups gathered round to sing and to pray. The fire-fighters did an incredible job. By Tuesday morning the cathedral still stood, just, but the damage caused was devastating. The money started to flood in for restoration work, and as it did the stories of those who were touched by what had happened began to flood in too. The couples married, the children baptised, the tourists uplifted, the atheists touched by the beauty and still wondering about faith. They talked of the heart of Paris; they talked of the soul of France. Out of the ashes, something glorious will, in time arise. Could this have been inspired by an idle tale, in first century Palestine? Jesus is risen.

Christian faith is not static; it is mobile. It has its moments of stillness but movement follows. In the movement, as much as in the stillness, God encounters the people of God. God continues to move in mysterious ways, and at the end of worship on Easter Day God’s people should find they have been moved and uplifted too. Moved and uplifted not by an idle tale, but by a persistent reality that intrigues, invites and inspires. Jesus is risen.

No idle tale of wishful thinking, the resurrection story encompasses everything that the experience of faith evokes: joy, fear, wonder, doubt, presence, absence, darkness, and light.

Easter Sunday is the apex of the Christian year, where everything in our faith comes together in that challenging, exhilarating mixture of mystery and revelation. Questions are answered by more questions. We are left wondering whether to explain Easter or simply experience it. Easter is an immersive experience that stretches our minds and imagination, and leaves us with a mixture of facts, reactions, parable and possibility. Easter is one of the great faith springboards into God's presence and God's response to a broken world needing healing and hope. Those who try to pin down the meaning of Easter will find it moving ahead, just out of reach, beckoning us onward to explore. The meaning of Easter can no more be pinned down than the risen Christ can remain nailed to a cross. The cross is empty, and so also the tomb. The night has gone and light has come. Darkness may come again, but the reality of persistent dawn breaks each day. For the people of faith, every day should be an Easter Day. Therefore we rejoice.

No idle tale, but truly the greatest story ever told, inspiring and transforming communities and individuals to this day. Making a difference to human lives and human stories, helping people find the words, the emotions, the forgiveness, the joy, the wonder and the excitement of life. Not because of an idle tale, but because of the greatest story ever told, in this Church, and surrounding community; in this city, and the surrounding nation; in this nation, and the surrounding world, stories of good news, great news, life-changing news are being told. Acts of heroism and simple kindness; offers of new beginnings and real forgiveness; works of selfless charity and gentle goodness are taking place. Women and men and children inspired, somehow, not by an idle tale, but by the story of an empty tomb, and a risen Jesus, Whose love for all, regardless, still speaks on and on into the aching, lonely world. No idle tale, but a story of new life love that speaks to you and to me, today.

Are you sitting comfortably? Then let us begin...

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Quoted by Jeff Paschal in Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 2, p345

ⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, Interpretation – Luke, p281