

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI  
"Can It Be?"  
Rev. Lou Nyiri  
March 31, 2024 (Easter Day)

## **Luke 24:1-12**

### ***The Resurrection of Jesus***

**24** *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.*

### **Sermon**

Former editor of The Presbyterian Outlook and now Senior Pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, NC, Jill Duffield, has written the following about this Easter Day discovery, Rev. Duffield is quoting linguist George Lakoff from David John Seel Jr.'s book, *The New Copernicans*, "People think in frames ... . To be accepted, the truth must fit people's frame. If facts do not fit the frame, the frame stays and facts bounce off."

Duffield continues, "If you're coming to anoint a dead body, news of a living person does not fit the frame. No wonder they were [perplexed]."

And yet, we know the truth that didn't fit their frame – or anyone else's for that matter. ... Grave secrets have a way of coming back to life and when they do, those who discover them often have to reframe their whole entire lives because all they thought was true, well, wasn't."<sup>1</sup>

Easter reframes everything and causes us to ask of ourselves, *Can it be? - & - If it can, then what does that mean for the way I live my life?*

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Homiletics Online website resources from their April 21, 2019 sermon starter "Jesus Is Dead?" - Jill Duffield, "Secrets people take to the grave don't often stay there," *Presbyterian Outlook*, March 26, 2018.

We're in good company when we ask questions like these, for ever since a life-ending cross succumbed to an empty tomb's life-giving resurrection – the church has been seeking to faithfully understand what this means for our lives – individual and communal.

In the words of Anselm, our theological understanding of today's events has been *fides quaerens intellectum ... "faith seeking understanding."* Ours is a faith which dares to question and ventures to inquire what faith has to say to world-weary souls who need more than saccharine, ready-made answers to life's deepest questions.

- Perhaps, this is the reason we keep returning to this Easter Day story for the last 2,000-plus years?
- Perhaps, this is the reason we ask again of this Holy Day, *is it true that new life can come from death-like circumstances?*
- Perhaps, this is the reason we keep showing up to this same place, year-after-year-after year, to witness a miracle ... and wonder ... Can it be?

This is how it began for the women in Luke's text – they showed up – in the routine of life – and they encountered something that changed their lives – and ours – for they left that encounter bearing witness to what they encountered – they began to tell their story.

Now, to be clear, while they encountered something that changed their lives – while they experienced resurrection promise – they did not go to the tomb expecting to find hope – they went expecting to continue in their grief – they went to complete their death vigil.

You see, they *were there* as the song goes “when they crucified [the] Lord.”

They saw Jesus die – first hand – and they did not expect it to go any further...

As Luke writes, “...at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared...”

They fully expected that death had had the final word.

Again, Luke writes, “They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. [And] they were perplexed about this...”

It made no sense.

And then, as Luke tells the story, two men, in dazzling clothes are standing beside them, the women are surprised ... terrified ... then they hear the words that will forever change their lives – “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

They find themselves caught in a narrative story that changes their life's mission.

Story can do that to us.

Story shapes us.

Story forms us.

Story moves us in the solar plexus – the core of our being – and prompts us to live life in certain ways.

James K.A. Smith (professor of philosophy at Calvin University in Michigan) writes of story this way,

“Stories can haunt and unsettle us, and the most skilled storytellers can do this with [an economy of words]. The imaginative expanse of story does not depend on the quantity of words. Rather, there can be a feel *among* the words ... that carry an aesthetic power disproportionate to their length.”

Smith goes on to give an example of the evocative power of words, using the six-word story said to have been composed by the master of verbal economy, Ernest Hemingway:

*For sale: baby shoes, never worn*

Smith explains, “In just six words the story creates – and invites us into – a whole world.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, one might recall another succinct statement which has held our attention ever since first put to paper, “He is not here, but has risen.”

With those words, the women at the tomb’s stories are changed & their purpose re-directed.

As Luke describes it, they are asked to remember, and it is in their re-counting of what has happened and what has been said that they return from the tomb and “told all this to the eleven and to the rest.”

The women become the first ones to bear witness – to tell the glad, good news story – they become the first believers in resurrection – and they haven’t even seen the risen Lord yet – this scene – as Luke writes it – is one of discovery!

How often do we approach life expecting death?

How often do we return to those places which entomb us – knowing they don’t hold life and yet they draw us:

An addiction...

An unhealthy relationship...

An endless loop in our mind telling us we do not have permission to dream ... to live ...

Perhaps today is the day we approach the empty tomb – with a new set of eyes and a new set of ears – that we might entertain the possibility of a new conclusion – one that provides hope and life and joy – new ways of seeing, being, doing, believing...

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, James K.A., [Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works](#), Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2013, p. 161.

To believe in the possibility that the question “Can it be?” can be answered with a “yes” and allow that “yes” – God’s yes – to shape the way we live life – to remind us and prompt us to discover that:

We need not wander around graveyards any longer.

We need not give in to the malaise and despair of hopeless existence.

We need not have to go it alone any longer, because we are part of faith community that has been traveling this road ever since two men in dazzling clothes reminded the women in Luke’s gospel “[Jesus] is not here, but has risen” – words which prompted those women to share their story of this encounter which then prompted Peter to get up and run to the tomb...then go home *amazed* at what had happened.

These words have sustained the church since her inception.

These words have prompted the church to dream.

These words have called us to discover God’s place in our midst and our place in this world.

The first Easter, those who went to the Empty Tomb thought they would encounter death – what they found was life ... new-life ... re-framed life.

Easter reframes our outlook as we recall words, like those from one of our Presbyterian Creeds, “In life and in death [and I’ll add here even in death-like circumstances], we belong [heart and soul] to Almighty God.”

Easter is a call to recall that we are a people who can faithfully move from lament into hope.

We know what lament is...

- While we are emerging through to the other side of the pandemic we still feel the effects of grief and despair as we come to terms with that time in our communal psyche (as of March 2024 the number of deaths from COVID-19 is over 7 million globally).
- We watch as wars in Ukraine and Gaza and other parts of this world unfold in real time –
- We are living in a time when the website Education Week has a page titled “School Shootings This Year: How Many and Where” which as of its last update on March 7 reports there have been 10 school shootings in since January 1 on K-12 school property having resulted in injury or death.

Lord knows we know what lament looks like.

Lord also knows what hope looks like – and – Easter reminds that lament can turn into hope.

Christian mystic/theologian Julian of Norwich, puts it thus, “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.”

John Lennon’s paraphrase of Julian of Norwich’s words, put it this way, “Everything will be okay in the end. If it is not okay, then it is not the end.”

Easter reminds that lament can turn into hope.

We ask, *Can it be?* And, Easter responds, *Yes!*

A young family had been waiting for Easter break for some time.

It had been several years since they all had been together, the family was going to meet at grandma and grandpa's farm in upstate New York.

Friday night they loaded the car.

Buckled everyone in and started the journey toward family.

It was a long drive and try as she might, the littlest grandchild in the back seat could not keep her eyes open.

The family arrived in the middle of the night – quietly greeted their parents – then carried this littlest one inside and tucked her into bed.

In the morning, about early dawn, if you were awake, you would have heard tiny footsteps come down the stairs and make their way to the living room bay window.

The site took her breath away – she hadn't seen anything like it before – she saw daffodils and tulips – new buds on trees – dew sparkling on grass from the light of the rising sun.

She couldn't contain herself and woke everyone as she declared, "It's new! The world is new!"

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We ask, *Can it be?*

Easter responds, *Yes!*

Alleluia & Amen!