

4.20.25 Sermon Transcript – Luke 24:1-12

Growing up, I can remember hearing the various tall tales of people like Paul Bunyan, and Johnny Appleseed, and Davy Crockett, and John Henry. Many of these stories are based on actual historical people, but the tales that grew up around them were just exaggerated. They were tales that were hard to believe, hard to understand, hard to think about because they were so far-fetched. This morning, we hear the Easter story. We hear the story of the women that go to the tomb. And this is the account in Luke's gospel, where there are several women who go to the tomb, and they see and they hear this message of Jesus' resurrection, and they go back and they tell the others. But I don't know if you noticed this line: "they thought it an idle tale." Something that they couldn't wrap their mind around. Surely this story was exaggerated! Surely this is nothing but a tall tale! It's nothing based in reality!

Eric Barreto, a New Testament professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, in his reflection on the text for this week, asks the question, "How do we believe the unbelievable?" Right now there is so much going on in the world, and in our society around us, and in perhaps in our own lives that makes it feel really hard to believe in the story of resurrection, in the story of hope – at least that is the case for me, I don't know about you. We might be asking ourselves, "God, where are you in the midst of all of this mess? Things are just going so terribly wrong in my life or in our community – where can you possibly be? How can we possibly feel the hope of resurrection when there is so much strife, and anguish, and grief?" This is the question for us today: "How do we believe the unbelievable? how do we believe what feels like an idle tale, a tall tale in moments? How can I believe in resurrection when there is so much death and pain and hurt?" This is the Easter question.

Now, for those of you who are here regularly, you know we've been going through the Gospel of Luke over the course of this spring, and in Luke's gospel we see Jesus constantly at odds with the power structures. In Luke's gospel in particular, when we come to the passion narrative, the story of Jesus's trial and execution, the cross is seen as a tragedy. Luke sees the cross as a tragedy that could have been avoided. In Matthew and in Mark's gospels, we do hear language about Jesus dying on the cross as a ransom, but we don't hear that in Luke's gospel. Instead, what we find in Luke's gospel is that Jesus is executed at the hands of brutal Rome. Here is a man who is unjustly executed at the hand of the empire, and his death is an exercise of power, of humiliation. It's an exercise in which Rome is making an example of Jesus saying, "Hey, you are threatening our order. You are threatening the way that our structure works. You say that you are the king of the Jews. You say that you are a king. Well, no, there is no room in this world for any king but Caesar." So Rome is making an example of Jesus, putting him out there on the cross, as a warning to everyone else: "You follow the ways of Rome, not the ways of the kingdom of God."

And so Eric Barreto, the New Testament professor, says, "In this way, as Jesus dies on the cross at the hands of the brutality of the Roman Empire. In this way, Luke's Jesus is not

alone. He is accompanied by many other anonymous victims of Rome's imperial violence. In this way, too, Jesus becomes a sibling of others unjustly executed by the powerful." So on Good Friday, it seems like hope is dead. It has been killed by Rome. Rome has destroyed it in Jesus' execution and has buried hope in a tomb. Jesus' disciples, they flee. They grieve. They try to figure out what the road forward could possibly look like now that Jesus is gone. Rome has won. Evil has won. Sin has won. Where in the world do they go from here?

But on Easter Sunday, on that morning, the women come to the tomb, and they come in grief. And what they find is that while Rome thought it could snuff out Jesus and the threat he posed without effort or without repercussions, there is, instead, a different reality. Jesus is not here. Jesus is risen. Jesus is not dead. And at first, this reality is one that is impossible to believe. The story, the Easter story, is a seed of hope for us. In a couple of different traditions, Holy Saturday is a day that is observed, though we don't really do that too much in the United Methodist tradition. Nevertheless, I think we really miss something when we fail to consider the work of God on Holy Saturday.

A few minutes ago, I sat up here with the kids and talked about the idea Jesus being busy wrestling death to the ground. In our creed, we recognize that Jesus descended to the dead. And what did that look like? You see, on Holy Saturday, Jesus wasn't just resting in the tomb. He wasn't just lying there. Jesus descends to the dead. Or in other words, descends into hell. And I know that I've shared this before, but one of my church history professors in seminary, talked about Holy Saturday in this way: He said, "Think about it like Jesus doing a commando raid into Hell, and he busts open the gates. He binds Satan and says, 'everybody, you are free to walk out. You are no longer bound here.'" See, Jesus is doing the work of liberation on Holy Saturday when he has descended into the depths. And then he opens the gates to new life, and he holds them open. When I think about this story, when I envision it, I envision Jesus descending into darkness, just as he was lying in the darkness of the tomb. He descends into the places of the shadows, into the pain of the darkness. And it's there that he begins the saving work. The work and the hope of Easter begin in the shadows! The hope and the work of Easter begins when it is still dark and it feels like death has won!

Every year on Easter Sunday, I share some of the words of St. John Chrysostom's Easter homily because to me they remain some of the most powerful words about Easter. St. John Chrysostom is one of the early church fathers and he wrote this:

Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free.
He has destroyed it by enduring it.
He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh.

Isaiah foretold this when he said,
"You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below."
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.

It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.

Hell took a body, and discovered God.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

O death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!

Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead;
for Christ having risen from the dead,
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever.

Hell took a body and discovered God. Easter hope begins in the darkness. Easter hope begins even in the midst of despair and anguish and grief. We can't always see it, but it is indeed happening. Over the course of Lent, we've been holding a book study on *The False White Gospel* by Jim Wallis, as he explores the question of how we respond in the midst of Christian nationalism. How do we respond as people of Christ, as those who want to walk in the ways of Jesus? And it has been a tough read. There's a lot of challenging conversation that we've shared, and there's been a sense of feeling like we don't know what to do. We feel overwhelmed, and perhaps in moments, like hope is missing. But in the last chapter of the book, he tells a story that to me has really spoken a word of hope.

So Jim Wallis, in 1985, was on his way to South Africa. And of course, this was when it was still an apartheid state. And he goes to South Africa and his first stop is St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town where Archbishop Desmond Tutu was going to be presiding that day. Originally there was going to be a rally, but then the government canceled it and so they moved inside to have a worship service instead. Jim Wallis was there for this worship service and at that time South African security police burst through the main doors of St. George's Cathedral and they went into the church and they lined its walls on both sides, and they were glaring at Archbishop Desmond Tutu as he was in the pulpit. And Wallis says, "I saw them take out notepads and even tape recorders as if to say, 'we are watching you and recording whatever you say.'" Desmond Tutu had just come out of prison at this point. And the message of those South African security police was, "Go ahead. We dare you. We

dare you to be prophetic, and we will just put you back in prison again.” That was the message that they were conveying with their presence there. Jim Wallis felt them saying, “We own this country, we own this cathedral, we own you, and we own your God.” And so what does the archbishop do in this moment where these forces who have been keeping the apartheid state in place, come in with a threatening presence? As Wallis recalled,

“The archbishop stopped speaking and bowed his head, seeming to pray. There he was, standing in that tall pulpit surrounded by so many large, threatening men. After what felt to be a long silence, while the bishop was in prayer, he suddenly looked up and flashed his eyes at the greatly feared South African Security Police. He said, ‘You are indeed powerful, very powerful. But you are not gods, and I serve a God who cannot be mocked.’ Then after smiling at them for a moment, he began to jump up and down like a good Black Baptist preacher, announcing with great boldness, ‘So since you have already lost, I invite you today to come, and join the winning side!’ The South African security police didn't know what to say or what to do. And so nobody else in there knew what to do either. And all at once, young people in the cathedral began to jump to their feet and chant in happy and joyful voices. In a dance called the toyi-toyi, lifting their legs high in a prancing movement often used during protests in South Africa. They danced right out the front door to embrace the hundreds of police standing outside. We all followed. The police had no idea what to do with all these dancing worshipers who showed no fear.”

Jim Wallace said that Archbishop Desmond Tutu taught him so much about a theology of hope. And there it was, a seed of hope being born in a place of hurt, of oppression, and of darkness. The work of Easter begins in the tomb. The work of Easter begins when the Alleluia is still buried. It has already started, even when we can't see it. The story of Easter is not an idle tale. It's not a tall tale, though at times it may feel like it because it's so hard to see hope and life in certain moments. But God is already doing the work, even when it is hidden from us. And God will indeed bring hope and life into the light of day. The work of Easter begins when the Alleluia is still buried in the ground. But today, we proclaim that Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.