

Idle Tale or Saving Drama?

[Luke 24:1-12](#)

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According to the gospel writer Luke, earlier this morning some women from Galilee went to a tomb in Jerusalem where they had left the dead body of Jesus. They went early, probably because they had been up all night, which is what people in grief do. And they came to the tomb, because it is somehow easier to grieve at the gravesite.

That is how the Easter story begins. It doesn't actually begin with everybody jumping to their feet to sing, "Alleluia." The beginning portrays some women bringing spices to a tomb where the dead, decaying body of Jesus lay because they knew by the third day it would smell bad. It isn't a very pretty image, is it? Death never is. That's why we try to avoid thinking about it.

My grandmother and her generation talked about death all the time. But they never mentioned the topic of sex in polite society. By contrast, we talk about sex all the time, but we never mention the topic of death. If you want to bring a dinner party to a grinding halt, just try to get a good conversation going on death and dying. Soon everyone will look at their watches and start explaining about baby sitters.

It used to be we thought of death as but a part of the design of life. Children grew up with it. We saw it in our homes, where the dying lay in their beds. Death used to be all around us.

But in contemporary society we've been trying to get death off the stage. Although there is now a wonderful movement away from this, for quite some time we isolated the dying in sterile rooms where they spent their final hours with experts: doctors, nurses, and pastors. If any of you have cared for the dying, you know why we don't like to talk about it. It's an awful thing to watch, and it is a humbling experience to try to care for the dying.

The reason isn't just that death is painful, ugly, and smelly. More disturbing is that death is the ultimate intrusion of the loss of control. And we just hate to lose control. We think it stinks! But if you're going to live your life out of the biblical drama, you're going to find that you're constantly losing control.

You'll discover death is one of the major characters in the biblical drama. In the Bible, people are dying left and right. And it describes their deaths, not with poetry, but with bluntness, with dust and grit reality. When Jesus was preparing to raise Lazarus from the dead after he'd been in the tomb for four days, the dead man's sister objected, "Oh Lord, don't raise him now, he stinketh!"

There it is again, that great unpleasantness with death that so offends our sensibilities. It just stinks. But after September 11, we all have been jarred out of our pleasant pretense that we could hustle death off the stage and not have to think about it. It was death on just too grand a scale. It overwhelmed us. It was beyond the limits of our comprehension. And since then, every time we hear about another body being pulled from the rubble of the towers, every time we take our place in another security line at the airport, every time we read about another child being blown to smithereens in Israel or Palestine, we confront the unavoidable again. The reason it's unavoidable is death has been woven into the design.

Everything about this mortal life is moving toward dissolution. Our scientists keep telling us that the earth itself will eventually run out of resources. Certainly, every mortal upon it will die. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard a cancer patient say, "It wasn't until I realized I was terminal that I learned how to live." Well, we are all terminal -- all of us. It is just a matter of when someone signs the death certificate. So are your all relationships terminal. One hundred percent of all marriages come to an end. So will your job. You've got a terminal career. You can try to hang onto those things for a while, but what a silly way to live. If that's your choice, either you're going to be worried every day about when you will lose it all or you're going to have to pretend that you won't lose it all. In the words of the disciples, that is an idle tale.

The disciples knew they couldn't keep the Jesus they had back in Galilee, because he was dead. Back in Galilee the disciples and the women who followed Jesus had nurtured so many hopes for what he could do. But last Friday, Good Friday, all those hopes died. The same thing will happen to you as well. There comes a time in every disciple's life, when you discover that your hopes for what Jesus would do for you have died on the cross. Whatever it is that you are afraid of losing, you will lose.

Easter won't prevent your losses. That's the good news. Easter isn't the happy chapter in your ongoing drama to hold onto your dreams and your life. It isn't the next thing. Easter is the new thing and the only thing that God can do in your life: God who breaks into the death, the loss, the grief and creates something new.

Our text today begins with the word, "But." I just love that little word whenever it appears in the Bible. Luke chapter 23 ends with Joseph of Arimathea wrapping up Jesus' dead body and placing it in a tomb. And Joseph thought he had reached the end of the story. "But," chapter 24 begins. "However," "Nevertheless," these are the words that signal a sacred intrusion into the way it is. The gospel always turns on a great "However."

But on the first day of the week, at dawn, the women came to the tomb and found it empty. Luke tells us that left them "perplexed" -- another word that signals sacred intrusion. Then they saw two men in dazzling garments beside them and were "terrified" -- the

Bible's favorite word for sacred intrusion. The women fell with their faces to the ground. Usually the next line of the Bible is the angel saying, "fear not." But according to Luke, these angels don't say that. Instead they say something that is worthy of fear⁵

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, BUT has risen." To say that Jesus is risen from the dead is not to say he has returned to his earthly life. That was gone. It was dead, over. To say that Jesus is risen from the dead is to say that God reached into that tomb and into history, lifting Jesus up to new life. The great thing about Easter is that God will do the same thing for you.

The reason this is so terrifying is that in order to receive this new life, you have to stop clinging to the old one. You have to stop looking for the living among the dead. Stop obsessing over the right career move. Stop pressuring your kids to be perfect. Stop fantasizing about what the latest diet will do for your body, because it is all going to die anyway. Just stop it. And go to the empty tomb, where there is the promise of a new life that will never die and the freedom to become committed to things that are eternal. Things like justice, caring for the poor, beauty, and worship.

My grandmother, the one who was comfortable around death, freely accepted her imperfect body. She was a large woman and didn't care. And because she was freed from that anxiety, she could devote herself to things that mattered. Things that were eternal like cherishing God, her family, and her grandchildren, her church and . . . fishing. In all the pictures we have of her, she's holding fish. I remember seeing her pull a trout out of a stream once, and saying, "Craigie, you'll never see anything this beautiful again." I hope you'll find something more beautiful than fish to behold in life. But as grandmother knew, you'll never be able to behold any of the beauty of life until you stop clinging to it.

How do we do that? How do we stop anxiously looking for the living among the dead? How do we find a new life that can be truly enjoyed because it is eternal? The same way my grandmother did. The same way the women at the tomb did. The same way the disciples and the Early Church did. Only by encountering the risen Savior.

It isn't enough to hear the angel's words or my words. No one in the Bible believed Jesus was risen simply because they heard about it. They all had to have some sacred encounter with the risen Christ themselves, because that is when they realized God would also break into their lives and create something new. But only if they placed into his hands the life they couldn't keep anyway.

When Luke describes the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, the scenes are striking only because they are so ordinary. One time he appears along the road as two men are walking to the town of Emmaus. Another time he appears to the eleven disciples and asks them if it weren't time for dinner. That is how the risen Christ will appear to you as well. He breaks into the ordinary making it extraordinary. Because that is what the resurrection is -- God's breaking into ordinary life.

As Luke moves to his second volume with the book of Acts, he describes how Jesus ascended into heaven, but sent the Holy Spirit to continue his transforming work among us. At Pentecost, the Spirit broke into history again with tongues of fire that inflamed the disciples with a world-changing message. Soon the Spirit was breaking into Samaria as people were turning to the risen Christ. Then the Spirit broke into an Ethiopian's life making him a new man. Then the Spirit broke into Saul the persecutor's life turning him into Paul the Apostle. The Spirit broke into the life of Cornelius, a Gentile centurion of the enemy's army. Then the Spirit broke into the lives of people in Antioch, creating a new church. From Antioch the new churches filled with new lives spread all over the empire.

Now we come to your part of this saving drama. Will you join those who have gone before you in giving to Jesus the life you can't keep, to receive a new life you can never lose? Will the resurrection drama break through again? It is really up to you. After the first Easter, God has already made it clear that new life is possible. You don't have to settle for the next thing. You can have the new thing, a life lived in the hands of God. But first you have to give him whatever is in your own hands.