

“Engaging the Details of This Day”

Luke 24:1-12

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In the Easter 2019 issue of *Journal for Preachers*, there is an article entitled “Preaching Easter in the Age of Twitter” which includes an imaginary Twitter conversation taking place during Easter worship. For those who cannot follow the lingo, I offer this word of solidarity – I had to look up the terms since I am old, out of touch and not on Twitter.

Sue Smith @suedoc23

About to hear my 25th Easter sermon.

Hoping for a fresh take.

#eastersermon

John Wilson@jw2010

You at the church?

@suedoc23 #easter2018

Sue Smith @suedoc23

Of course. With the fam.

It’s Easter. WYA?

@jw2010

John Wilson@jw2010

Back right corner. Reading all the Easter memorials.

I can’t stand the smell of lilies. You?

#lilyhate #insertsin2018? @suedoc23

Sue Smith @suedoc23

Not favorite smell. Front pew. Got here late.

Kid sister took 4VR!

#easter #makinganentrance #whynotroses

John Wilson@jw2010
You hear this preacher before?
#eastersermon @suedoc23

Sue Smith @suedoc23
Yeah. She's good. IMO @jw2010
#eastersermon

John Wilson@jw2010
TBH, never understood resurrection @suedoc23
#nowwhat

Sue Smith @suedoc23
SMH. Me either. Not sure if I believe it.
Maybe she'll enlighten me.
#hope #eastersermon @jw2010

Jen Walsh @spiritnoreligion2017
Don't count on it. @suedoc23 @jw2010
#eastersermon

Sue Smith @suedoc23
.@spiritnoreligion2017 You here?

Jen Walsh @spiritnoreligion2017
Nope. Went to sunrise service.
#alreadydone #easterbrunch @suedoc23 @jw2010

Sue Smith @suedoc23
Good move. @spiritnoreligion2017

Jen Walsh @spiritnoreligion2017
She telling story about the butterfly?
#newlife @suedoc23 @jw2010

#eastersermon

John Wilson@jw2010

Not yet. Anyone out there hearing an Easter sermon in 280 characters?

#eastersermon #brevity @spiritnoreligion2017 @suedoc23

Sue Smith @suedoc23

I bet it would be good.

#brevity @jw2010

Hank Williams @notthathank2011

Our preachers are doing a partner sermon. That count?

#twoisbetterthanone #eastersermon

Carol Lead @seminary222

Jesus. Born. Lived. Loved.

Taught. Served. Challenged.

Died. Rose again.

Reign. Story is yours too.

Born to: Live. Love. Teach.

Serve. Challenge. Die. Rise again. Reign.

#eastersermon #brevity #gospel

John Wilson@jw2010

.@suedoc23 Why is everyone laughing?

Sue Smith @suedoc23

Don't know. Missed it. Distracted.

Kid next to me is playing fortnight.

#fortnight @spiritnoreligion2017

Jen Walsh @spiritnoreligion2017

Love fortnight. Who's your favorite character?

@suedoc23 #easter

This imaginary conversation presents an all-too-real picture of current reality – not just the ubiquitous nature of social media, but the way we engage the details of this day. It is true that our devices are with us always, as is Jesus. So, this kind of exchange might be taking place in this room right now... But it is also true that many people come to church on Easter with various questions and doubts about the story or the perception that we have heard all there is to know.

Many assume that everyone comes today ready to celebrate the good news of resurrection and thus, if this is not where we are, we don't fit in. If we have developed questions about this day or perhaps never bought into it, if we think we understand it and thus have nothing to learn, or if we are here just to please someone else and are trying not to look bored, we may think we are the oddballs. But if we fall into any of these categories - I will not ask for a show of hands – we are not alone.

People come to church on Easter, like every other Sunday, for many different reasons, but many come seeking some assurance that something about this story is true. This is the case even for those of us who think we know it all and for those who pretend we don't care. For the concept of eternal life is a mystery too large to grasp. And the question of whether there is life after death is one everyone confronts. We used to say that death and taxes are the only givens in life. Apparently some people avoid taxes. No one avoids death.

The bad news is I have no proof of eternity, no way to recreate the resurrection. No one does, though this service, with its music and liturgy, stirs memories and hope. But the good news is we have the story to guide us, and if we follow the characters in it, we will discover that they have a great deal to offer us as we come seeking assurance.

In Luke's telling of the story, women take center stage. We don't learn until the end of the story who these women are – Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James, among others – but it is women who go to anoint Jesus' body at dawn on the first day of the week.

Like the other disciples, they do not begin this Easter Sunday in a spirit of resurrection joy. They are filled with sadness and fear. They have seen their beloved teacher die at the hands of Rome and as his

followers, they too might be at risk. But they go anyway, persevering through the tears and uncertainty to care for Jesus in death. It is ritual behavior with little practical benefit - it will not bring Jesus back - but still the rituals are helpful. Rituals help us process grief, and so it is important that we experience them in the way we expect.

I learned how unsettling any change in rituals can be when my mother died with a cerebral aneurysm at 48. When my aunt from England saw that in lieu of flowers, we asked people to make memorial gifts to two scholarship funds at the community college where mother had taught, Bobby became very upset and said, “But people must have something to do with their hands!”

We were confused until we realized that in England, most people have beautiful gardens. When there is a death, they cut flowers, arrange them and give them to the family. When we told her that flowers here are purchased with a credit card and that the casserole brigade is the personal gift, she was “O.K.” We had disrupted her expectations about ritual behavior and needed to tell her about our rituals.

The women who go to anoint Jesus’ body have their expectations disrupted. When they arrive at the tomb, they discover that the stone has been rolled away. They walk in tentatively and discover that Jesus’ body is not there and they are perplexed – not saddened or filled with joy – just perplexed. They don’t know what to think.

At this point, we need to pause and recognize one thing we can learn from these women – the value of being honest. The women do not pretend that everything is “O.K.” Nor do they pretend to believe that Jesus has risen, just as he predicted. None of the disciples believes this at this point. They begin this day full of sadness and fear, then become confused, and make no effort to hide their feelings, but how they feel does not prevent them from experiencing the wonder of Easter. It puts them right where they need to be; as will how we feel, if we are honest.

My youth minister talked often about the need for honesty in the youth group, insisting that honesty not only helps human relationships, it is the one thing God wants from us more than anything else. There is wisdom in this insight and the truth is we can’t fool God anyway. We

may be able to fool other people, perhaps even ourselves, about what we believe, but we cannot fool God. So, we might as well be honest about our questions and doubts. It will help us on the journey toward faith.

But returning to the story, as the women sort through their feelings, two men in dazzling clothes stand beside them and they are terrified. Luke doesn't say why, but they must suspect that these are some sort of angelic beings, holy messengers, representatives of the Divine. No matter why they are there, their presence alone evokes a sense of awe.

I remember a time in my teen years when I prayed for evidence of the Holy and then wondered what I would do if God showed up. I did not grow up in church but had gotten involved in a youth group and one evening I asked for a sign. Almost immediately I had second thoughts. The very idea of a Holy God plopping down to chat with me gave me an overwhelming sense of awe, not exactly fear, but something like it.

This is what the women feel when the divine messengers show up and while in other accounts, they are told not to be afraid (Matthew 28:5; Mark 16:6), in Luke the messengers say, "Why do you look for living among the dead?" It is an interesting question for us. Why do we so often go looking for life in places where death is in charge?

Anyway, the messengers go on to remind the women of Jesus' prediction that he would suffer, die and be raised on the third day, and finally they begin to process what is happening. They do not see the resurrected Jesus yet, but they begin to make room for something different. Jesus' body is not there. Angelic figures have shown up, talking about death and resurrection. Could he be alive?

At this point, we need to pause again and recognize another thing we can learn from the women - transformation happens because God makes it happen. The women go the tomb to anoint the body, not to pull a theological rabbit out of a hat. God takes the initiative to raise Jesus and sends messengers. In like manner, we move from doubt to faith when God intervenes in our lives. We have to be open to the possibility. Sometimes the Risen Christ comes and we refuse to recognize the truth before our eyes. But if we are open, Christ will come.

It happens in different ways. Not many people see a 900-foot-tall Jesus as Oral Roberts claimed to have seen. But we do sense the Spirit of the Risen Christ - in the rebirth of hope after a period of despair, in some experience of healing, in the wonder of a sunrise. We need to pay attention, but it does happen. God shows up in our lives and we believe.

But again, returning to the story, after the angelic figures show up and startle the women with good news, they run back to the others and tell them what has happened, but they do not join the celebration. Luke says they regard their words as an idle tale or in another translation - so much nonsense. Is it because they are women? Is it because the news is crazy, too good to be true? We don't know, but Peter decides to check it out for himself, and when he does, he confirms the story and is amazed!

Is this insulting to the women? He would not take their word for it! Or is it affirming? He only goes because they have given witness to their experience. Who can say? All we know is that the women begin in sadness and fear and move on to confusion but end in wonder and joy, so much so that they have to tell others about their experience.

Here we learn something about Christian witness. The women give witness to their experience not because they are commanded to, but because it is so exciting they cannot keep it in. They give witness to what they have experienced - nothing more, nothing less. They have seen an empty tomb and heard from heavenly messengers. They have not seen Jesus yet. So, they tell the others what they have seen and heard. And they do this with no assurance of how others will respond. They are at first dismissed and then Peter goes to see for himself. Perhaps they have influenced him. But the women have no control over what others believe. They can only give witness to their experience.

Such is the nature of all Christian witness, whether to the resurrection or any other part of the Jesus story. We tell others not because we are commanded to, but because we can't keep it in. We tell others what we have experienced, not some script someone else has prepared. The most powerful witness is personal and honest, whether we think it is persuasive or not. And then, we leave the results to God.

One of the most powerful words of witness I have ever heard was shared by Dr. Jack Noffsinger, the founding pastor of the church I served in Winston-Salem. He had been a chaplain at the major battle on Iwo Jima during World War II. He said the experience of witnessing so much horror and burying so many men nearly destroyed his faith. But then he led an Easter Sunrise Service at Mount Suribachi and somehow in the midst of that service, in ways he could not explain, he sensed the presence of the Risen Christ and hope was reborn within him.

That's what it takes for any of us to hold on to faith in the midst of our challenges, even to believe in the first place. Arguments for the existence of God and hope for eternal life are helpful. And the witness of others to their experience is helpful too. But in the end, only a personal encounter with the Holy will convince us. The good news is the Risen Christ shows up again and again. We just need to pay attention.