

“And Idle Tale or Something More?”

Luke 24:1–12

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

April 17, 2022

There is a scene in Lewis Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking Glass* in which the White Queen tells Alice that she is 105 years old.

‘I can’t believe *that!*’ Alice says.

‘Can’t you?’ the queen responds in a pitying tone. ‘Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.’

Alice laughed. ‘There is no use trying,’ she says. ‘One can’t believe impossible things.’

‘I dare say you haven’t had much practice,’ the queen tells her. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour each day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!’ (pp. 88-89)

It sounds like the conversation between the women who go to anoint Jesus’ body and the disciples who are huddled away in fear. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some other women tell the disciples everything they have experienced. They have gone in grief, planning to practice rituals of care for Jesus’ body, but the stone has been rolled away from the tomb and his body is not there.

They are perplexed, to say the least, but suddenly two men in dazzling white clothes, angelic figures, appear and ask why they are looking for the living among the dead. Jesus is not there. He has been raised. Don’t they remember what he said about being handed over to sinners, being crucified, and on the third day, rising again?

Hearing this, they remember, and so they hurry to tell the disciples. But Luke says these words seem to them an idle tale, and they do not believe them. “One can’t believe impossible things,” they say, “There is no use trying.” How could the queen be 105? How could a dead man come back life, no matter desperately they might long to have him back?

We may attribute the disciples' incredulity to the gender of the first witnesses, and this is part of the story. In the first century, women are considered to be less reliable witnesses than men because they are thought to be more emotional. It sounds familiar, does it not?

When first-century Roman Jewish historian Josephus writes about the need for two witnesses, whose testimony can be confirmed by their good lives, he adds, "But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex (*Ant.* 4.219)." First-century Hellenistic Jewish thinker Philo thinks women are naturally inclined to be deceitful. "...woman is a selfish creature," he writes, "and one addicted to jealousy in an immoderate degree, and terribly calculated to agitate and overturn the natural inclinations of a man, and to mislead him by her continual tricks (*Hypothetica* 11:14-15)."

It sounds a bit like Grumpy in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* who says that females are full of wicked wiles. When asked what wicked wiles are, he replies, "I don't know, but I'm again' 'em!"

In a world where women are viewed with profound disrespect, it comes as no surprise that the women's testimony is rejected, even though Jesus has a much higher view of women. It seems particularly offensive, though, that the boys don't listen to these women, these boys who don't have the gumption to get up and go to the tomb themselves! The women are the ones who stay with Jesus to the bitter end. The women are the ones who go at dawn on the first day of the week to anoint his body. For goodness sakes, one of the women is James' mother, and he doesn't believe her?! Such is the view of women.

But while gender bias may be part of the story, and it is a matter we struggle with to this day, there is a bigger issue here. It is difficult to believe someone could live to 105, unless we have known someone who has, which, of course, in this church, we have. Gerri Harris would have been 108 in October! It is difficult to believe someone who has died can come back to life, days later, such that there is no question that he really died. It just doesn't happen.

Jesus may have spoken of this to the disciples but they don't remember it because it didn't make any sense. The truth is they shut down when he mentioned suffering and death. These things are not in

the script for the Messiah. They may not even have heard the part about rising again, but even if they had, they would have dismissed it. Who could believe such an impossible thing?

But at the very end of our reading, Peter decides to go and check it out for himself. He stoops, looks in the tomb and sees the linen cloths by themselves. His experience is not exactly like the women's because the angelic figures are no longer there. If you snooze, you lose! But he sees enough to send him home in amazement. Luke does not say he believes yet, but a seed has been planted, one that will lead to belief.

I should note that this verse is not in some ancient manuscripts, but it is in some trusted ones, and the basic details of Luke's version of the story are confirmed by other Gospel accounts. Peter sees the empty tomb and is ultimately moved to belief in the resurrection. What seems like an idle tale becomes something more.

The question is, "How does this happen for us?" This story, this Easter business, may seem like an idle tale or perhaps just wishful thinking. We already hear a lot of idle tales in this time, distortions of the truth, conspiracy theories that would make Vladimir Putin proud. How do we know in general what is true and who can be trusted? More specifically, how can we believe this outlandish story of Easter? Is it an idle tale or the very foundation of our faith? To the contemporary mind it seems implausible. So, how do we come to believe?

The first answer might be — we take the word of the first witnesses. Surely we can do better than the boys huddled up in fear on Easter morning, the twelve stooges minus Judas. Can we not trust the women who were there? There are other people who have given witness to their experience with the Risen Christ. It is not the same thing as personal experience, but there are times when we take the word of trusted others. It may seem like wishful thinking, simply hoping there is something more than this life, that love is stronger than fear, but just because it is wishful thinking doesn't mean it isn't true.

Frederick Buechner once said that Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects a desire that somewhere the score is being kept. Dreams are wishful thinking, he

says, children playing at being grown-up is wishful thinking, interplanetary travel is wishful thinking. “Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes on,” he says, “Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 96).” Wishing for eternal life is a sacred venture, but is the witness of others enough to get us wishing?

There are also logical arguments that might persuade us to believe or at least consider the story to be within the realm of plausibility. For me, the transformation of frightened disciples into courageous followers of Jesus willing to die for their faith provides one of the most powerful arguments for resurrection. What could have changed these people so dramatically, other than a personal experience with the Risen Christ?

There are arguments that seem compelling, but we hear them with a bias toward believing. From an objective perspective, there are also counter arguments. Like the witness of others, arguments may contribute to plausibility, but rarely do they make for faith by themselves. We may need to pay attention to words of the angels. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” All arguments for or against the resurrection may fall into the category of dead ends.

Homiletics professor Lucy Lind Hogan tells a story about a time she had an opportunity to go to the Holy Land (workingpreacher.org). When her husband told their oldest son she was going, he asked, “Why?” Not prepared for the question, her husband said, “Well, you know, Jesus,” to which the son replied, “Tell her he’s not there.”

Lucy Lind Hogan contends that her son must have understood the angels’ admonition. Being in the Holy Land can stir sacred memories, but the Living Christ is not there, or at least not in bodily form. Nor is Jesus or belief in the resurrection found in arguments alone.

So, where then is belief found? How do we move from viewing the story of resurrection as an idle tale to embracing it as something more? Personal experience. As Peter’s experience is not exactly like the women’s experience, our experience will not be like that of the early disciples. Our encounter is with the Spirit of the Risen Christ, with the power of resurrection working in and through our lives. But it is possible to have such an experience.

I have told some of you about the experience of the founding pastor at the church I served in Winston-Salem. Dr. Noffsinger was a Marine chaplain at Iwo Jima and he said he nearly lost his faith with the sadness of burying all the soldiers who died. But he sensed the presence of the Risen Christ during the Easter Sunrise Service on Mt. Suribachi, and his faith was reborn. We can sense the presence of the Risen Christ in different ways — in worship, in majestic places, in quiet times of prayer — but when we do, we realize this is more than an idle tale.

Some experience the power of the resurrection working in their lives, bringing healing after a period of illness, bringing reconciliation after a period of alienation, bringing hope where there was despair. I could look at some of you in this room today and ask, “Can I get a witness?” You know what I mean...

All of us are experiencing something like this with COVID-19 now weakening, there is hope, even with the newest sub-variant. We experience resurrection power each spring, as all nature around us brings life out of death. And we have the ability to make new life possible for others through our clothing ministry, food truck, Family Promise, Housing All and other ministries, and through our care of each other.

Brian Blount, the president of Union Presbyterian Seminary, where I did doctoral work years ago, says we should live resurrection in the present like we are certain resurrection is coming in the future, fight the resurrection fight, trusting Paul’s admonition that we have been given the ability and obligation to join (as quoted in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2022, p. 8). When we do that, we not only claim the good news; we help others to do so.

The Spirit of the Risen Christ works not only in us but through us, but the Spirit of the Risen Christ is alive and at work, and that is how we come to believe. We cannot prove it to anyone else, but we don’t have to. When we encounter the Risen Christ, we realize this is more than an idle tale. We are called to share this good news, like the women who go to the tomb, without worrying about how others respond. And we are called to live like we believe what we say. But first, like Peter and the women, we are simply amazed, thankful, and filled with hope.