

April 12, 2020

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**Reading:** Luke 24.1-12

**The Message:** NONSENSE?

Video

I'm preaching about the empty tomb to an empty room, but I know you are tuned in, hungry for a word of hope. May God guide and bless my words.

Hear these words that Terry read:

"Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them, who told this to apostles"; but they thought the story seemed an idle tale -- nonsense -- and they did not believe them.

The men thought the women's report that Jesus had risen was nonsense. I cannot think of a more reasonable reaction to the story.

It's common sense, isn't it? Jesus was dead. Brutally put to death. The body had been placed in a tomb; left through Friday night and the following Sabbath day. Now on Sunday morning the women come running with a garbled story about angels telling them that Jesus had been raised to new life.

The disciples who heard them knew far better than to believe fairy tales. Such talk had to be hysterical nonsense. It was far more sensible to face the terrible fact: the enemies of Jesus had won. Crucified, dead and buried. This was no time for wishful thinking, by women who could not cope with the disaster. They were the ones to face facts. Jesus was dead and with him were buried all their great hopes for a bright new world.

Luke was pretty courageous -- telling the Easter account this way. Much later in the first century, when Luke was writing, the apostles were the great heroes, many of them were now the great martyrs of the faith; a glorious company of those who had been faithful to Christ Jesus even though it caused their deaths. But Luke tells it warts and all. At first they didn't believe. Resurrection was nonsense

Yet, their reaction seems most reasonable, common sense. In

times of disaster, some one has to keep their feet on the ground. Jesus was dead; history. And no amount of their love for him could con them into believing hysterical stories.

And yet, it is the consistent witness of the New Testament that they were wrong.

The women were right but the apostles were wrong.

Common sense was wrong, being realistic was wrong.

Jesus was alive.

It does defy all our attempts to adequately explain it, our Easter faith may always look stupid in the eyes of many, but with one voice the witnesses cry out: Christ is risen! The crucified One is the risen One.

Perhaps because of the extremists in Christianity who seem to us to be wrong about so many other aspects of Christianity, we are tempted to treat the resurrection as only a metaphor; to see it as a great paradigm of success after failure, restoration after disgrace, hope after hopelessness. This has of course much validity. The resurrection of Jesus is a mighty metaphor.

But in the New Testament, the resurrection is at the forefront of the Christian movement. It was something that really happened. Remarkable, indescribable, and for many implausible, yet the Jesus who was crucified was known to be very much alive. Death had been transcended. The tomb could not hold the beautiful young Saviour.

Jesus was alive, and because he lives we shall live also. Death is not a cul de sac. It was not the end for Jesus or the New Testament Christians. Sometimes they talk about it in words like resurrection, sometimes with the phrase eternal life. But the essence was not a metaphor but reality, mysterious reality, but reality nonetheless.

The earliest surviving documents which we possess are the letters of the apostle Paul. He, like some of the Gospels, talks about the "appearances of Jesus." Jesus appeared to disciples in various situations; to Peter and then the other disciples, and on one occasion he appeared to over five hundred people gathered together. Last of all, Paul says, "he appeared even to me". But not like a ghost. It was the same Jesus although his body had been radically transformed. These days we might try to express it by saying some kind of sub-atomic metamorphosis had taken place. We are grasping for words; how can one adequately use words to describe a reality (the resurrected Christ) that unlike anything else that limited to this space/time matrix in which we now live?

Listen to Paul.

If it is only for this present life that Christ has given us hope, then we are among all people to be pitied the most!

But the truth is this: Christ was raised to life, the first fruits of the harvest of the dead

That vibrant, cheeky, audacious, bold as brass Christianity of the first century was founded on and inspired by something mysterious that really happened: Christ is risen!

This improbable-yet-true, resurrection thing, is utterly consistent with the extravagant and slightly ridiculous God of the parables and deeds of Jesus. Again and again we are confronted with a loving God who "goes over the top" in generosity. A God who does not know when to stop, when enough is enough, when things are past redemption.

Remember

the ridiculous case of the first sign that Jesus did at the wedding in Cana? How he turned about 600 litres of water into wine?

or the parable about the mother who decides to bake some bread and mixes up enough dough for 60 loaves of bread?

or that pivotal parable about the father who recklessly gives his second son half the value of the family farm and allows him to go off to the city and squander it; and when the young fool comes crawling home asking to be a slave, the father runs to meet him and throws and throws a giant party in his honour?

or Jesus' praise of Mary who in her great love for Jesus anointed his feet with costly perfumed oil worth about \$30,000?

It seems like nonsense? Of course it does. It is so foreign to our way of seeing and doing things.

If the Gospel story has been telling us anything, it is this: Get ready for a God who does the unexpected and the ultra-extravagant. God is unreasonably extravagant, gloriously unpredictable. The holy, saving nonsense of God is mightily at work at Easter!

Such is the heart of the Easter message. Unpredictable marvellous, wonderful, amazing, astonishing, surprising, astounding, strange, startling, extraordinary, miraculous, very strange, unheard of..

If Easter highlights anything, it highlights the incredible gift of God's love when we really need it most. If there ever is an Easter when we're all aware of need, it's right now.

Easter is the resurrection.

Christ overcame death.

And today that means we live in hope. Easter is not cancelled because we live in pandemic. In this Holy Week, church has come to our homes in an intense way.

As I speak of the empty tomb in an empty room as the faithful have remembered freedom from bondage and resurrection in this week that marks the Passover, as most of us are intentionally splintered — this unnatural practice of physical distancing — in a time that has always been marked by unity, by gatherings of family and faithful, as we gather around lap tops, tablets or phone screens — watching alone instead of in our sanctuary, as images of Easter bunnies and memories of Easter egg hunts fade, perhaps especially now, people of faith find hope.

Friends, I have not got a clue about how to define the resurrected life of Christ, nor do I have any way of explaining what our resurrection reality - which has already begun - will finally be like. Eternal life, unlimited in every direction, leaves me overwhelmed with wonder!

Explanation? Sorry, no. Affirmation? YES! The resurrection is totally consistent with the whole Jesus happening, in line with the wondrous nature of the Gospel.

Easter is truly about that glorious implausibility of the holy love of God who will never, ever let us go.