

Idle Tales of Life Revealed

Curtis Preston

Easter Sunday

April 8, 2007, 6:30 am Worship

First Church of Christ in Longmeadow

United Church of Christ

I've spent a lot of time over the past week or so, trying to imagine what that first Easter must have been like for those women who discovered the empty tomb. They'd been following Jesus for a while, perhaps some of them even years. They heard him speak, they'd seen his miracles, and they believed he was the one who'd come to fulfill the scriptures, the one come to redeem and reclaim Israel. He was certainly different than they'd expected, not a military might or even a political whiz. In fact, he seemed to be pretty bad at playing politics and mostly seemed to succeed at making those with power angry. But still they followed, still they believed. Then came the betrayal, the denial, the calls for crucifixion, and eventually death. He'd been mistreated and humiliated, they were more than disappointed, more like devastated. So they came to the place where his lifeless body had been placed to at least give him a fitting burial, and perhaps to say their good byes. What they wanted was perhaps closure, but what they got was something else entirely.

"On the first day of the week at early dawn," Luke's gospel tells us, "they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared." This isn't exactly what the Luke's gospel says. Does anyone remember what the first word of today's scripture reading was? "But." Luke's gospel actually begins with a rebuttal. "But on the first day of the week they came to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, BUT when they went in they did not find the body. In fact the word "but" occurs 6 times in these 12 short verses.¹ But on the first day of the week, but when they went in they didn't find the body, He is not here, but has risen. But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb.

Perhaps because Easter comes every year, and perhaps because it is in the spring, or perhaps because we proclaim the resurrection of Christ every Sunday, or perhaps for some other reason, there is a way in which

¹ Theodore J. Wardlaw "Living By the Word," *The Christian Century*, March 20, 2007, pp 19.

Easter has become routine. I'm not just talking about the over-commercialization of it, I'm talking about the inevitability of it. It's easy to let Easter become like Spring itself become anticipated and welcome, like the warming of days and the life giving rains. But Easter was and is anything but routine. Easter is like a giant detour sign in road of God's relationship with humanity. We come traveling along the road of life, minding our own business, when WHAM! There's Easter. The resurrection of Christ is the supposed to surprise and astound us. The women went to the tomb expecting to find a corpse, but instead they found an empty tomb. And if that wasn't enough, they are told, not only is Jesus gone, but that he has risen. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they are asked. They are then implored to remember what Jesus had said to them. It is upon remembering that they understand. It is only by looking back can they make sense of the powerful promise of the moment. When I look back at those life-changing moments in my life, I am able to see from this place what I was not able to see when I was there. Time and distance yield a particular perspective, and I'm able to see how God was at work in ways I never could have imagined when I was in the midst of it.

The women didn't come to the tomb expecting resurrection. They came to say good-bye. They came to put an end on the story. But God was at work in ways they couldn't imagine, despite the fact that Jesus had told them what would happen. One of the central truths of Easter is that you can't keep a good God down. Despite the fact that Jesus had been killed and it looked like, and felt like it was the end of the line, the end of the story, and that they'd have to find their messiah elsewhere, God was not done. God had more to say and do. He is not here, but has risen. God turns their mourning into glory. Luke reminds us that we do not know the end of the story. We do not know how it all will turn out. We do not know, in the moment, what the future will be. It is only looking back and remembering that we see where God was at work, how God was present with us.

I had briefly considered titling today's sermon "Easter Buts" but thought better of it for obvious reasons. There is much of the story that seems to us an idle tale. Much that we cannot rationally understand, much that seems dubious and doubtful. There are many for whom the stumbling block to faith is whether or not this story is true. And yet for me, I think the greater question is not whether the Easter story is true story, but whether or not it is *OUR* story. For if all of this happened or didn't happen long ago, what is that to us, if we don't experience the risen Christ today? See for me the power of the Easter is not just that Jesus died on the Cross,

and it is not just that there was an empty tomb, and it even that Jesus was raised and that his disciples saw him, but is instead that I have experienced the risen Christ. We've started a men's discipleship group that meets every Thursday morning. One of the questions we ask every week is "where have you experience the risen Christ this week? It's amazing to hear what people come up with. Men described experiencing the risen Christ through children, in a conversation with a loved one, walking in the woods, yes—even in church sometimes, or in the interaction with someone begging for money. The wonder of Easter is that this story, which seems an idle tale, is *my* story. I have seen Christ's face in others, that I have known Christ's presence in moments of despair and fear and in moments of joy and celebration. Why do you look for the living among the dead? the women were asked nearly two thousand years ago. It is a question that still calls out to us today. Is Christ among the dead, or among the living? Has God done all that God is going to do, or is God still at work, still writing the story, still changing the story of our lives, still bringing hope from despair, still bringing life from death, still calling out to us and saying "But you don't know the whole story. You might think you do, but you don't. Trust me."

We all know too many Last Suppers and Good Fridays. Our world is full of betrayal, desertion, and leaving for dead, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ dares to claim that God gets the last word, not the world. Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but . . .