



First United Church of Oak Park

Fake News?

Luke 24:1-12

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Good friends of mine, a couple about my age, told us a few of years ago about a scientific study that Mike, the husband, had just read about. The study, apparently, documented that as adult men become a bit hard of hearing, the first range of sounds that become difficult for them to hear are those that are in the alto range - that is to say, the sounds they find difficult to hear are the sounds of women talking to them. Mike thought that was very funny. Charlotte not so much; she just rolled her eyes. Like many other women, myself included, she is probably no stranger to saying something to her husband, or son, or some other guy that goes in one of their ears and out the other.

We do not know if the disciples in our story this morning were hard of hearing or not, but they certainly did not pay much heed to the women, whom they seemed to dismiss with a shrug of their shoulders. "These women are just talking," they said to each other, "there's nothing to this story. It's nonsense. It's fake news." I can just see them blowing the women off and turning back to whatever the ancient equivalent was of the golf tournament TV.

What must that have felt like to Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Johanna, and the other women? These women had spent the day on an emotional roller coaster. They began the day with a mindset of religious duty, and they set out early to do what needed to be done. They put one foot in front of the other and kept themselves busy, as people do in the early days after a death. They set their first century alarms, collected everything they needed, and made their way to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body for burial.

The minute they got to the tomb, their plan was destroyed. It was still pretty dark, but there was enough light to see that something was wrong. The stone was rolled away. The body was gone. What in the world had happened? They were completely confused.

And then, in a flash - imagine how fast this was all moving - they were scared out of their wits, because everything went from darkness to light, and two men in dazzling clothes proclaimed unbelievable news to them: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you [this would happen], while he was still in Galilee."

Then they did remember, and with joy ran to tell the disciples all about it, only to be met with skepticism and indifference. It is hard to imagine what it must have been like to be inside those women's skins that morning, as they ricocheted from despair to confusion, from fear to hope, from doubt to disbelief to joy, to - let's be frank - probably wanting to knock a little r-e-s-p-e-c-t into the hearts and minds of those disciples.

That last one probably took some time, but Luke doesn't tell us about that. Where the story ends is with the good news of the gospel being received with skepticism and indifference.

This is really an amazing story, and one thing that's amazing about it is that so little has changed in the last 2,000 years. People still greet this story with skepticism and indifference. One does not need to be a person of another faith or an atheist to doubt the truth of this story. A survey conducted last year in Great Britain

documented that a substantial number of people do not believe the Bible's version of Jesus' resurrection.¹ Nearly half the general public, about a third of all Christians, 11% of active Christians, and - get this - one-third of Christian ministers in Great Britain either disbelieve or doubt the biblical account of the resurrection. I wasn't able to find comparable data on the United States, but I'd be willing to bet that our numbers aren't so different. It wouldn't surprise me to discover that many of us and our friends harbor doubts about the women's story, because "He is not here; he is risen" is a story that really stretches the bounds of our credulity.

However unbelievable this story might be, it is a story that won't go away and that makes it amazing, too. It has such staying power. It has such power, period. It was on the strength of this story that the church was born and grew in the ancient world. Twenty or thirty years after Jesus died, Paul traveled around the Mediterranean, starting churches and writing letters and this story, as he recounts it in I Corinthians, was the only story he had to tell. He didn't have a record of Jesus' teachings - those got compiled later. What he had was the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and his own experience of encountering the risen Christ. Christ is risen. "Death has been swallowed up in victory."²

Here we are, 2,000 years later, hearing this story again. Perhaps we, like believers across the ages, are caught somewhere between the joy of the good news and skepticism about its validity. I think it's okay to question the story; the good Lord didn't give us brains and the capacity for critical thinking with the idea that we would park them at the door of the church on Easter morning. We should be able to ask all the questions we want; we should poke and prod this story. The problem is that the good news of the gospel does not lend itself to scientific inquiry.

The truth of this story is discovered in different ways. I love the appearance narratives that we find in the last few chapters of the gospels. Perhaps what I love most about them is their everydayness. The disciples, who finally do come around, do not encounter the risen Christ in the middle of bold, public action. No. They meet him in a back room, where they are huddled together in secret, avoiding Roman authorities. They discover him at breakfast and dinner. One stumbles across him in a garden. Another meets him while on a business trip. None of these people were looking for Jesus when they discovered him. They didn't expect to see him. He just showed up, in the middle of whatever it was they were doing. That's how and where hope is born: in everyday contexts.

In his book about the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. tells a moving story about meeting the risen Christ at his kitchen table, over a cup of coffee, late at night, while everyone else in the house was sleeping. He was exhausted after a long day and he had just hung up the phone through which he'd heard yet another death threat, and he was ready to throw in the towel. And, as he sat there at his kitchen table, meditating and praying, he found a new courage and a new sense of God's presence. King wrote that this fresh sense of God's presence gave him the strength to keep going.³ It gave him hope.

I'm always a little hesitant to use somebody like Martin Luther King, Jr. as a sermon example, because we are not all Dr. King and we don't all have the depth of his faith on which to draw. Many of us harbor a little more doubt than he seems to have had; maybe our faith wavers a bit more than his did. The point of this illustration is not that we can all be like Dr. King in the expansiveness of our faith and the boldness of our moral projects. The point is that we are all like Dr. King because we are all frightened of something. We all

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-39153121>

² I Cor 15: 54 (NRSV)

³ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986 [1958]), p. 125.

face situations that bring us to our knees, whether they are on a big screen or a small one. And we all have kitchen tables, or the route we drive to work, or beds by which we kneel at night.

And, often when we least expect him, that's where Jesus tends to show up: at the everydayness of places like the kitchen table, the car, our bedside. That people continue to meet him there is the promise of Easter. He is risen. "Death has been swallowed up in victory." The death-dealing forces of the world do not have the last word. The poverty that robs children of their futures does not have the last word. The replicating virus of racism does not have the last word. The forces that tear apart families and friendships do not have the last word. That voice on the other end of the phone that night, who threatened to kill Dr. King and his family, does not have the last word. The oncologist or radiologist who gives you the bad diagnosis does not have the last word. The boss who gives you a poor performance review does not have the last word. God has the last word. Christ is risen. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

The ancient Christian symbol of hope is an anchor, the heavy weight that is dropped over the side of a ship or a boat when the vessel needs to steady itself. Without an anchor, a boat that had stopped, so its crew might rest, might drift off course, or a boat in a storm might be lost.

I like imagining hope as an anchor, because it doesn't make false promises. It reminds us instead that there are still going to be storms. There will always be strong currents that threaten to pull us off course. But the truth of Easter, discoverable in the everydayness of our lives, reminds us that the love of God, known to us in the risen, living Christ, can hold us steady. He is our anchor. He is our hope. And he is risen. Thanks be to God.