

A Whopper of a Story
The Rev. Amy Spagna
Easter Day – April 17, 2022
Luke 24:1-12

If you thought the stories we've told this past week about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, washing the disciples' feet, being betrayed by one of his closest friends, and giving himself up to the powers of the Roman Empire to be killed were absurd, then have I got a whopper for you: this man who was proven to be dead, and was buried, is alive. It makes absolutely no sense. We know that once someone's heart and breathing stop, that's it. And we SAW it happen to him.

When they went to the tomb early that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other unnamed women were expecting to find his body, wrapped up in linen, and not an empty spot occupied by what must have been a couple of angels. It is understandable that their reaction to not finding what they expected there is one of fear and disbelief. But, they never have doubts about what the angels tell them. That Jesus isn't there because he's risen is such an incredibly crazy story that it HAS to be true, and it HAS to be repeated to everyone in their entourage. But none of them believes it at first. Peter is the only one of the remaining eleven disciples who goes to the tomb to see it for himself. He is simply amazed at what he finds there. Nobody is quite sure what this news means in the moments after it's been delivered and discovered, except that the world has been changed forever.

Along with the two Marys, Joanna, Peter, and all the other players in this drama, we've been through a lot in the last several days. We've retraced Jesus' steps from his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, to that last meal shared with his friends; to the garden

at Gethsemane; and finally through the narrow, winding streets of Jerusalem as he made his way up to be crucified. We've walked alongside the ones who were brave enough to stay and watch the horror unfold, and the ones who fled because they feared they might be next. Through it all, we've shared in their nearly unspeakable grief at the murder of their teacher and friend. Now, we can share in their bewilderment and rejoicing that God has thrown a great cosmic banana peel squarely in the path of death. This slippery offender has moved us from darkness into light, from grief into joy, from death into a whole new kind of life. It is a life where sin no longer has us in its grip and where we have been freed to choose to love beyond our limits.¹

At the core of Luke's recounting of this event is the necessity of *remembering*, of getting past the emotional wall put up by our shock and awe and trying to think through it logically. That's essentially what the angels ask the women to do, when they prompt them to remember what Jesus had said when he predicted that "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected... and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Lk 9:22, NRSV) Using their heads is what effectively transforms their shock at finding something unexpected into joy. Their act of remembering is what empowers them to go and tell the apostles. It is what provokes Peter to satisfy his curiosity and go check it out for himself. And it is what allows us to keep telling this story ourselves, in words, actions, and song, nearly 2000 years later.

Remembering is also what enables resurrection to continue beyond the singular moment in time when it happened. Up to that point, those closest to Jesus had spent

¹ Lauren F. Winner, "Pastoral Perspective: Romans 6:3-11." In *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2 (Lent through Eastertide)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009], 346.

the last three years being formed into a community which would live as he had taught them. What they would find in the days and weeks that followed was that they also had the same power to preach, teach, and heal as Jesus had. His presence was still among them in a tangible way as they broke bread and read Scripture together. And so this new Way, and the people who followed it, "... spread outward from Jerusalem, showing the imperial structures of the world what it looks like to love your neighbor as yourself."²

And still the Resurrection goes on in each and every one of us: "We are not here, as people who call ourselves Christians, because Jesus survived – because that's not what happened. We are here because Jesus was resurrected."³ That we are here, gathered together in this church on Easter Day for the first time in three years, are not relegated to seeing each other only in "Hollywood Squares" on a screen, and having to sing those great Easter hymns on mute so we don't overwhelm each other's speakers, is a resurrection. We, too, have had new life breathed into us, even if we never really entirely left, and the work of loving our neighbors, of teaching, of waging peace and reconciliation, never stopped. Today feels different – and not just because we've broken out the fancy vestments, the Flower Guild has created an explosion of color for us to look at and smell, and Jim and the choir are leading our songs of praise with gusto. It feels like we have actually gone to the tomb alongside Mary, Joanna, Mary, and all the rest, and we've seen and heard the news that he is not here, but has risen. It's our story – and it is God's story, for this time, and for all time. John Chrysostom, the golden-tongued preacher of the late fourth century, framed it for the ages:

² The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Brooke-Davidson, "If We Survive the Resurrection: A Meditation for Holy Week." Email, 2022.

³ Ibid.

Hell took a body, and discovered God.

It took earth, and encountered Heaven.

It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.

O death, where is thy sting?

O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is Risen, and you, O death, are annihilated!

Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!

Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!

Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!⁴

⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *Easter Sermon*.

http://www.anglicansonline.org/special/Easter/Chrysostom_easter.html [accessed April 13, 2022].