

## **“Just A Beautiful Story?”**

*Luke 24:1-12*

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church  
Greensboro, North Carolina

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*Easter Sunday*

Like millions upon millions of people around the world will do this day, you have just listened to one of the most amazing, one of the most intriguing, one of the most provocative and powerful stories the world has ever heard. It is the Easter story. Today we heard Luke’s account of the discovery of the empty tomb early that first Easter morning. Each Gospel writer tells the story somewhat differently, recalling various things, focusing on different objects, and addressing different audiences. But what I wish to emphasize this morning is that the story is not only told differently but is heard differently as well. What we hear in this story and what we take from this Easter service will depend upon many things – our individual needs that accompanied us to our monitors as we livestreamed this service or listened later online. Our life experiences, our education, our expectations, and our preconceptions. The Easter story is a remarkable one to be sure, and perhaps the most transformational story ever told.

Far more popular and poignant is the Christmas story, the story of the incarnation relating the birth of Jesus. But it is the Easter story, the story of the resurrection that has given birth to the Church of Jesus Christ, an institution that has survived the sword of persecutors, the scorn of philosophers, the failings of its leaders, the folly of its own members to spread to every corner of the earth, to every race and tribe relaying the news that Jesus is the risen and reigning Lord. Without question this story has proven to be transformational. It is a story, not to be ignored, that invites us to respond and demands that we make a decision with respect to it. It is this story that changed a racist like Simon Peter into an agent of reconciliation and an assassin like Paul of Tarsus into a saint. So radical are the transformations that this story has produced that people speak of it as being “born again,” entering a new existence with a new set of values and commitments. But such a transformation finally depends upon whether or not the story, when heard, is embraced. Do its listeners receive it and ignore it or do they receive it and respond to it? If they do the latter, then it changes from a story to their story.

Lloyd Douglas’s popular novel of this past century *The Robe*, has a scene that has touched many readers. Marcellus, the Roman centurion, who according to legend presided over the crucifixion of Jesus, goes back to tell his fiancée, Diana, his impression of the awe-inspiring story of this Jesus whom he had just seen crucified. And Diana responds to Marcellus’s description by saying:

*"It is a beautiful story, Marcellus, a beautiful mystery. Let it remain so. We don't have to do anything about it, do we? Let us plan to live – each for the other – just as if it hadn't happened."*

Well not to worry, Diana, for there are many people still who upon hearing the story respond as you suggested. They will accept its beauty, its mystery, maybe even its miraculous nature, but they really see no connection between this story and their story. Before the age of Corona Virus, they would typically go home from Easter services saying, "Oh wasn't it exciting to be in worship on Easter morning? Weren't the lilies gorgeous? Wasn't the music majestic? The overflow congregation was so impressive. Even the sermon wasn't half bad! But Easter is over and done with now for another year and we can go on with our lives." And so, the businessman returns to his work on Monday with the same values and priorities he had on Friday. It's business as usual, dog eat dog, look out for number one. And with the benediction there are some who will resurrect the same old grudges and resentments that have been eating away at them for years. Others will return to their same old fears, their same old emptiness and despair, their same old destructive patterns of thought, their same old stale sins. Having proclaimed with others "Christ is risen! Alleluia!" they will, in reality, leave Christ in the tomb and make no connection between the story of Easter and the story of their own lives. That's one-way people always have, and I suppose always will hear the Easter story of the resurrection of Jesus.

The again, there are others who will listen to this Easter Story with skepticism and disbelief. I mean how can dead men be raised. Tombs don't just open up, or at least this has not been a part of their experience. Surely this story must have been created by the church, a product of a simple people's hopes or maybe the figment of someone's fertile imagination. No, they conclude, the apostles must have stolen the body, manufactured the tale, and lied about all those resurrection appearances of Jesus.

But is that plausible, it is really likely that people would devote their lives and be willing even to die for a known fabrication? I have always believed that the greatest evidence for the resurrection, is not the empty tomb but rather the transformation that took place among the twelve apostles themselves. Clearly something happened, something dramatic and earth shattering that changed those frightened, fearful, hopeless, and cowardly disciples who were hiding in the back alleys of Jerusalem on Friday into men of confident and courageous faith who a short time later would gladly lay down their own lives for the conviction that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not a fictitious tale but a fact of their personal experience. Death no longer had a hold on them, even as it lost its grip on Jesus.

But of course, skepticism is no new way of responding to the Easter story either and it should not surprise us that people still react this way. In our lesson this morning, when the women ran back to the eleven from the empty tomb, we are told that the words seem to the apostles "an idle tale" or "nonsense" acc. to the NIV. Later in the upper room the disciple Thomas refused to trust his own eyes and longed to touch the open wounds of the risen Lord. And Matthew records at the close of his gospel that before the ascension of Jesus, even among the eleven apostles who were worshipping the resurrected Christ upon the mountain, there were still some who doubted!

Years later when Paul was preaching to the intelligentsia of Athens, he got to the point in the story of Jesus about the resurrection of the dead and the Athenians mocked Paul and walked away because they simply could not believe that dead men would come back to life. It all seemed an illusion or a hoax. So, skepticism and disbelief have been around for as long as there has been an empty tomb.

Would you not agree that we miss out on a great deal in life because of our blind assumptions that some things simply cannot be, that miracles are merely fairy tales, and that nothing is more sacred than human knowledge and the power of reason and intellect? It is the old-fashioned dogmatism that makes *a priori* assumptions and then interprets all the evidence in light of the things we already have decided to be true. The earth is the center of the universe. Therefore, the sun must rise and set. Or, the earth is flat. So of course, Columbus could not possibly reach the east by sailing west. And of course, dead is dead and irreversible, so something else must account for the empty tomb and the Easter miracle.

When will we learn that while we need not sacrifice our intellect to accept Christianity, neither can we always limit our faith to the size of the human mind or always be about the business of making what we believe culturally and intellectually palatable? It has always intrigued me that when learned intellectuals who are either atheistic or agnostic do finally embrace Christianity – people such as C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, John Updyke, or Dr. Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Research Institute – it is not some watered down version of the faith that they opt for, not something digestible by the modern mind, but the whole story of Jesus, the son of God, crucified, dead and risen from the grave.

Lee Strobel, a legal investigative reporter for the Chicago Tribune, set out initially years ago to disprove the evidence for Jesus as the son of God but became a believer in the process and ended up writing his many books defending Christianity. Frank Morrison was a skeptic as well. He set out to disprove the truth of the resurrection saying: “I am going to write a book that will throw out all this nonsense about Jesus being dead and coming back to life. I am going to explode that myth, that legend, that foolishness of people in the first generation.” But in the process, he did a radical about-face, and in his book, *Who Moved the Stone* he concludes by saying: “I couldn’t avoid the irrefutable evidence. I kept bumping into the evidence and I discovered the resurrection to be true.”

And Francis Collins, author of the widely acclaimed book *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* was a committed atheist and looked to physical chemistry to unravel the mysteries of life. One day a patient of his challenged him to articulate his own beliefs. In a later interview he said the following:

*“For me, that leap of faith came in my twenty-seventh year, after a search to learn more about God’s character lead me to the person of Jesus Christ. Here was a person with remarkably strong historical evidence of his life, who made astounding statements about loving your neighbor, and whose claims about being God’s son seemed to demand a decision about whether he was deluded or the real thing. After resisting for nearly two years, I found it impossible to go on living in such a state of uncertainty, and I became a follower of Jesus.”*

So, if you are hearing this story with skepticism and disbelief this morning sitting there virtually tuning in to this broadcast service then I challenge you to have the courage to doubt your own doubts and to begin your own search. You will have much company along the way.

Still other people hear the Easter story with hilarity. Yes, you heard me say hilarity, as strange as that may seem. There is not sufficient time to explore it today, but I read recently of an ancient and little-known and less-understood response to the Easter Story.

The (*“Journal for Preachers,” Easter, 2007*) told of an ancient tradition in some Eastern Orthodox churches, perhaps the most staid and tradition-bound of all Christian churches, where the members gather in sanctuaries on Easter morning but their worship consists primarily of listening to the priest tell jokes, not religious jokes necessarily, but jokes simply intended to produce laughter. (I think I understand why Easter has come to be regarded by some as a divine comedy, even a cosmic joke, but please don’t tell your friends that in today’s service the preacher said Easter was a joke. That’s not what I mean at all. But this is a topic for another day.)

I thought of this again during our Tenebrae Service on Good Friday evening as our choir sang ancient words attributed to Peter Abelard, 12<sup>th</sup> century poet philosopher:

*“This is the night of tears, the three days’ space, sorrow abiding of the eventide, until the daybreak with the risen Christ, and hearts that sorrowed shall be satisfied. So may our hearts share in thine anguish, Lord, that they may sharers of thy glory be; Heavy with weeping may the three days pass, to win the laughter of thine Easter Day.”*

So, we can listen to the Easter story with indifference, with disbelief, or even with laughter. Then again, we may hear it and respond to it out of sheer habit, and this may be the most regrettable response of all. For all the downsides of our worship this Easter morning, one of the upsides is our worship today is not routine, or habitual but intentional and will, no doubt be memorable. The fact is that for most of us ordinarily Easter has simply become a part of our annual religious routine, and it is quite possible for Easter to be reduced to a Sunday on the liturgical calendar because we know the story so well and have heard it so often. In devout and religious people, the story sometimes fails to strike a responsive chord or to offer anything new or different or unexpected.

So how are you hearing the Easter story this year? This year at least we have to recognize that Easter is not ultimately bunnies and Easter eggs nor about the lilies, the liturgy, the music, the message, the lovely clothes, or the overflowing sanctuaries. This year Easter simply cannot be a lovely ritual and nothing more.

You see, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not really about ritual. It is not about aesthetics, it’s not about lovely music, moving messages, overflowing crowds or churchly habits. It is not even about religion. The story of the resurrection is about redemption and renewal and hope and the power of God’s transforming love and if the resurrection is real, as I am convinced it is, then we must receive it and respond to it in some way this Easter morning.

Returning to Douglas's novel, *The Robe*, let me finish the story of Marcellus and Diana. The centurion told his fiancé that he could not accept her proposition that they go on living as if the story had not happened, and so he says her:

*"I can't go on as if it hadn't happened. It is not clear what I am to do. But I couldn't go back to living as I did – not even if I tried. I couldn't."*

So please do something with the Easter story you have heard in this strange year of isolation or better yet allow it to do something in you. My prayer is that you have listened to it not simply with your ears, but with your heart and your mind and your soul. Because if you have, then like Marcellus neither will you be able to go on living as if it hadn't happened. You will know that this story is far more than a lovely tale, or a figment of someone's imagination, or even an episode within the life of the church. This story is essential to all that we are and all that we hope to be, and it continues to have the power to transform us and our world!

*Prayer: Eternal God, we thank you this Easter morning for the profound beauty and the everlasting power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb. We pray that these days will see our Christ emerging from the tombs in which we in our generation have often placed him --- tombs that have been enclosed with stones of indifference, of disbelief, and even of churchly habit and sealed with the hardness of mind and heart. By your grace fill us with new reverence, new humility, new devotion and enable us to celebrate your living presence and your transforming power as we eventually return to the demands of our days. We ask these things in the name of Christ Jesus, our risen and reigning Lord. Amen.*