

An Idle Tale

Luke 24:1-12

Text:

*... but these words seemed to them an idle tale,
and they did not believe them.*

Luke 24:11

Introduction

Don't you love a good story? I do. My all-time favorite is the story of two painters who were engaged in the tedious task of meticulously painting the gold trim on the ceiling of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. High up on the scaffolding, one of the painters became bored, looked down, and espied an old woman making her way to the votive candles. She lighted a candle and knelt down to pray. The bored painter turned to his fellow-worker and said, "Watcha this." He took a thimble-full of paint and dropped it down in front of her . . . splat! Then he called down: "Hello, down there! This is da Lord aspeakina to you!" The old woman didn't look up and didn't look around, but just went on praying." The painter was annoyed that there was no reaction, so he took a cup-full of paint and dropped it down in front of her . . . splat! Then he called down: "Hello, down there! This is da Lord aspeakina to you!" The old woman didn't look up and didn't look around, but just went on praying." The painter was truly annoyed now with the lack of response, so he took his paintbrush and threw it down in front of her . . . splat! He called down a third time, this time more emphatically: "Hello, down there! This is da Lord aspeakina to you!" Whereupon the old woman looked up and admonished him: "Shut up a you face! I'm a talkina to your mother!"

Of course we all know that this never happened. It's just a clever story. It's a contrived anecdote told to me nearly fifty years ago by one of my seminary classmates, who was a natural-born humorist. Virtually every day he would tell a humorous, whimsical story he had fabricated to keep his classmates in a jolly frame of mind. Most of them were so preposterous that no one would ever mistake them as factual. There wasn't an element of truth in any of them! They were all idle tales. You could never believe a thing he said ... except, of course, when he was serious.

The Resurrection Fantasy

The resurrection of the dead man Jesus was preposterous! How could anyone believe it? It was a group of women who told this story to the apostles. Given the status of women in that society at that time, how could the apostles trust what women were saying? Weren't women the possessors of the soft heart, the ones who detested war, who couldn't accept the broken world as it was and wanted the world to be a place of rapturous beauty rather than a battlefield of vain glory? Weren't women the ones who navigated through life as keepers of the moral compass?

In the close intimacy of the human dynamic and the advocacy of life, women occupied the supreme position. Men deferred to them in this arena as *the givers and supporters of life.*ⁱ Women were the symbol for that further life which comprised religion and love and morality. Men placed in women's hands their own conscience . . . Men depended on women to maintain

the men's masculine stability. Without women, men would have felt like straws in the wind, to be blown hither and thither at random. Women were the anchor and the security; they were the restraining hand of God.ⁱⁱ

While men were the realists, women were the visionaries; and as visionaries—who loathed venomous violence and audacious atrocities, who wanted a better world for all their sons and daughters—as incurable visionaries, wouldn't they be likely to fantasize about an utopian society? If some poor innocent were mutilated on a cross, wouldn't a soft-hearted, feminine visionary be inclined to deny it? If some poor, emaciated, bloodless King of the Jews had been laid in a borrowed grave, wouldn't the starry-eyed visionary—who wants a *gentler, kindlier world*ⁱⁱⁱ—go so far as to make up a happy ending? Jesus had been their everything. Now he was dead. The women could have used the contemporary lament:

*He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.*^{iv}

Now, in this garden of death and decay, rather than being possessed in ecstasy by enduring love, the women are held captive by chronic grief with no hope of consolation. It is too much to bear! The heart must exercise self-preservation; the mind must invent a story.

We can hear it now as they recite it to the apostles: *At early dawn, we went to the tomb, taking the spices which we had prepared. And we found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when we went in we did not find the body. It was gone. Two angels in dazzling white spoke to us: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Terrified, we bowed our faces to the ground. . . . The tomb is empty! He is risen!*

A likely story! Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James. They were all women! Visionaries! Givers and supporters of life . . . gone to anoint the dead. They are not to be believed! Of course, it seemed like an idle tale. The apostles couldn't believe a thing they said . . . except, of course, when they were serious.

The Resurrection Reality

For the women *knew*. The Marys, Joanna, and the other women *knew* there was no body in the empty tomb. The women *knew* what it would take numerous post-resurrection appearances to prove to the disciples: he is risen. The women *knew* what the apostles refused to believe: that Jesus' Galilean prediction had come true—that *the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise*. The women *knew* because they had remembered these words. The women *knew* that Jesus had returned to the world and their vision of a new world of peace and love and truth was already in the making, though it may take millennia to be realized. By the resurrection of the Christ, the women *knew* that God's love for them was a reality that far surpassed any fantasy their visionary dreams could possibly fabricate.

Here is another story, this one historical and factual: One day, in sixteenth century Paris, a beggar, desperately ill, was brought to an operating table of a group of doctors, who said in a Latin they were sure he would not understand: “*Faciamus experimentum in anima vile.*” (“Let us experiment on this vile fellow.”) Whereupon the beggar, actually an impoverished student—later to become a world-renowned scholar, Marc Antoine Muret—asked from the slab on which they had laid him out, “*Animan vilem appelas proqua Christus non dedignatus mori est?*” (“Will you call ‘vile’ one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?”) What Muret understood so movingly was that on the cross God’s Son laid bare God’s heart for all to see: “This is my body broken for you, this is my blood shed for you—for each and every one of you, because whether you believe it or not, my love for you is greater than any telling of it.^v My love for you is more real than any tale about it—idle or true.

What Muret understood so movingly about the cross, we can understand passionately about the empty tomb: that is, that God has laid bare his mind—his intention, his plan—for all to embrace: “. . . in Christ shall all be made alive . . .” for “in fact Christ has been raised from the dead . . .”

Now, why is it so hard to believe? Is it because it’s too good to believe—we being strangers to such goodness?^{vi} . . . to such generosity . . . to such grace?

The key to belief lies in bidding farewell to fantasy as fabrication and receiving the mystery of faith as reality. The key to faith lies in recognition of the Christ as risen from the grave, alive for eternity, and victorious over death. We’re speaking here of the very heart of the scandalous gospel: that is, that Christ, the Son of God— crucified, dead and buried—has been raised from the dead, which sets forth enormous—even preposterous—implications for each one of us and for those whom we love. *But in fact*, declared Paul, *Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

Granted, these words simply do not make any sense logically or as an outcome of empirical analyses or the scientific method. They seem to us an idle tale, but, according to Paul, they compose a fact of faith. . . . *in fact Christ has been raised from the dead*

Is It True?

Karl Barth, considered by many to be the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, was once asked, “Why do people come to church?” Barth answered, “People come to church asking the question, ‘Is it true?’”

I suspect Karl Barth is correct here. I have heard there is a loving God who created this universe and who presides over it. Is it true? I have heard there is a God who knows when even the tiniest sparrow falls from the sky. Is it true? I have heard that because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. Is it true? I have heard that God can transform my life. Is it true? I have heard that God forgives me and blots out my shame and guilt? Is it true? I have heard that I can let go of the past that plagues me and live in a present that delights me. Is it true? I have heard that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and that because he lives we too shall live. Is it true?

Is it true? Is it true? Yes, it is true! Yes, it is true! Yes! Yes! Yes! It is true! This is the Day of Resurrection! *Christ hath burst His prison. 'Tis the spring of souls today.*^{vii} Let the whole earth tell it out abroad.^{viii} Christ is risen!

Conclusion

The golden-tongued orator, the great, great preacher, W. E. Sangster awakened in the prime of his life to discover that he had contracted an incurable disease that caused progressive muscular atrophy. Day after day it became clearer to him that his muscles were gradually wasting away. His voice had been one that could make Christian truths ring out as purely as clear tones of fine china glassware softly struck. Now that stentorian voice had failed—a feeble vestige of a former force. Reduced even further in his degradation, his throat ceased to function, and he could not swallow. On Easter morning, only weeks before his death, he wrote to his daughter, “It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice with which to shout ‘Christ is risen!’ But it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout ‘Christ is risen!’” It would be still more terrible to have a voice and not believe it!

Do you believe it? Do you believe Christ is risen? . . . and because he lives, we too shall live? If we do, then the true tale has been told, and real life has already begun. Eternal life is ours. And our *tears of eternity*^{ix} shall be tears of infinite joy!

The Rev. Calvin Coolidge Wilson
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Easter / 4 April 2010

Notes

ⁱ I'm indebted to my wife Elizabeth for this phrase.

ⁱⁱ This entire paragraph is an adaptation from D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, chapter 1, part ii, p. 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ A phrase attributed to George H. W. Bush during his presidency

^{iv} W.H. Auden, *Stop All the Clocks*, stanza 3

^v This paragraph is taken from the sermon titled *The Spirit and the Power*, the first sermon preached by William Sloane Coffin, Jr. as Senior Minister of The Riverside Church, New York City, 6 November 1977.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} From the hymn *Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain*, stanza 2, line 1

^{viii} From the hymn *The Day of Resurrection!* stanza 1, line 1

^{ix} Phrase from Alfred Edward Housman, *More Poems* (1936), *foreword*, line 3