

“An Idle Tale” / Luke 24:1-12 / 31 March 2013 (Easter)

Happy Easter to you! Whoever you are, whatever your story, know that there is a power loose in this world that defies even death. May its mystery, its promise, and its calling lead you back to face your world with joy. For if ever an age stood in need of resurrection joy, it is ours! Did you notice a curious thing about this morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke? Resurrection occurs, but no one actually ever gets to see the risen Christ. They see two guys in white. They see an empty tomb, but that's all.

Now, if you and I were to be honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that we like our Easters to come with visual aids. It's nice if the weather cooperates, too. It is surely no coincidence that the church proclaims the resurrection at a time when the Northern Hemisphere is usually springing into new life: the buds, the birds, the flowers. It's easy to imagine Jesus bursting from the spiced tomb when all the world around us is offering evidence that life indeed does follow a season of death. Nature herself gives us a birdsong soundtrack for our Easter celebrations, and it's easier to believe in resurrection when the world is warm and bright. But since Luke's account of that first Easter morning gives us no appearances of the risen Christ, I think that resurrection can also be found in those many times and places where it's not immediately apparent. In fact, there's a whole different kind of Easter that you celebrate when the world still feels like winter!

Do you remember Easter 2008? Five years ago, we had the earliest Easter that any of us will ever live to see. You might know that Easter falls on the Sunday after the first full moon of spring. Since spring supposedly begins on March 20, Easter could conceivably come as early as March 22. That's not slated to happen for another 282 years. But back in the year 2008, Easter visited a frosty world on March 23—something that will not happen again until the year 2228. I don't know what things were like down here in balmy Pittsburgh at that time, but we were living up North, and Easter truly did come before springtime that year. It came when the world was still held fast in the gray grip of late winter, with salt-stained roads, edged by dirty snowbanks, colorless skies. The branches were bare, and the winds blew cold. The town where we were living at the time is still known to many older people as “The Icebox of Pennsylvania.” It's a nickname that their chamber of commerce chose for them back in the 1920s in a successful attempt to attract skiers, and snowshoers, and other people who loved winter sports. That town regularly reports the coldest temperatures in the state, easily fifteen degrees colder than Pittsburgh on an average winter day.

Now, the church I was pastoring had an annual Easter sunrise service...outdoors. One of the ladies in the church had a nice pond at the edge of the woods, and each year we celebrated Easter there at the crack of dawn. Most folks would huddle around the fire while I stood up at the pond and read the Easter story then administered the Lord's Supper. Let me tell you, nothing says “Easter” like a half-frozen pond, and your teeth clacking together so loud that you almost can't hear the minister. But it didn't matter if you could hear me or not; I was hurrying through Holy Communion so fast it seemed sacrilegious. And yet, there's a whole different kind of power to proclaiming resurrection in a wintry world where nature is not cooperating, where daffodils and young blossoms do not give a visual aid to the message of new life. For we do not always awaken to fresh new visions of the resurrected Christ. Easter happens in the night, unnoticed, when all the world is asleep, or plunged deep in its Good Friday griefs, or just too tired, or distracted, or helpless to care. Resurrection happens in the night.

And that's why occasionally—on years like this one—when Nature refuses to cooperate with our joyful Easter tidings, I think it's just as well. Remember how Christmas down in Whoville surprised the Grinch when, “It came without ribbons, it came without tags, it came without packages, boxes, or bags!” So perhaps we too need to experience the truth of Easter without its holiday trappings. No daffodils, precious little sunshine, and in our gospel text, no lifelike cameo appearances by the resurrected Christ. For the real work of resurrection occurs in the dark, and visions of the risen Lord are rare. Easter dawns out of darkest night, surprising even those who were told to expect it. It comes at first in disbelief, an idle tale, but it has the power to change everything.

Now, it's true that the gospel writer Luke will go on to give us some of the most vivid, memorable resurrection appearances in the four gospels. He alone will give us the vision on the road to Emmaus, Jesus appearing in locked rooms, but that's all much later. At least here, on the very first Easter morning, the risen Lord doesn't appear to anyone in Luke. He goes a whole day without making himself known to the disciples. Luke agrees with Mark on this little detail of that strange morning of long ago: Nobody saw Jesus. All they saw was guys dressed in white—in Mark it's one guy; in Luke it's two—promising resurrection. Sometimes Easter comes without visual aids. Resurrection isn't about seeing the face of the risen Christ; it's about finding renewed life in all the plain old unspectacular places where we expected death. We will discover resurrection not in miracles and wonders—though those may come eventually—but in our relationships, in our attitudes, in our spirits transformed. Easter doesn't begin with an ecstatic spectacle but with an extraordinary suspicion of joy that grows, and blossoms, and springs to life. A joy that can be found in most places...if you have eyes to see it.

Did you notice how the disciples immediately dismissed the women's talk of resurrection, how they called it “an idle tale,” but then they hurried off to see for themselves? Consider the dreams, the farfetched notions, that have in time become realities and risen to change the world! Antibiotics, the Internet, simple combustion engines. All of them seemed like an idle tale before their day in the sun appeared. Isn't it very often the seemingly idle tales that give us visions worth pursuing?

The great sagas and epic poems might shape civilizations, but find a person whose life was changed by reading *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer. I think I've known more people whose spirits were touched and transformed by reading about Charlie Brown and Snoopy. It's not usually the heroic tale of conquest and glory that save us from ourselves and our fears. Sometimes it's the seemingly idle tales that save us. It's not too much to claim that resurrection—as glorious as it is—can be found in the daily lives of ordinary people. Which of us has not scurried to the tomb of our despair, only to find that it was empty, and we had just enough resurrection to live the day before us? Which of us has never known an unexpected calm in the face of chaos and disaster? Which of us has never experienced a flooding, pervasive sense that all is well even when all did not seem well, when death was at hand, or tragedy, or loss? Which of us has not known a clear, wordless joy in the face of deepest sorrow. A vision of well-being that comes upon us out of nowhere and leaves as unexpectedly as it came, but leaves us in its afterglow with the new knowledge that joy is possible! It leaves us with the bold realization that fear and death do not have ultimate control over who we are. Perhaps we've lacked the vocabulary to talk about those experiences, and so in time we've forgotten them. But they're real. Easter doesn't always come with ecstatic visions, but with quiet strength.

You see, Easter is never fully believable. And it never really makes sense. It offends every rational bone in our bodies. It flies in the face of the cold, gray world all around us, a world that constantly assures us that this is all there is, that death reigns supreme. But still Easter visits us in irrefutable ways, and we are changed by its occasional appearing. Easter is very simply our bold proclamation that death and fear cannot rule our living. And fear—as you know—isn't usually chased away by Prince Charming on a white horse. If you've ever conquered your fears, your addictions, your vices, then you know that it cannot be done with all the armies of might, but only with determination and perhaps a little help from above, when the time is right. Fear is undone when it's faced with quiet resurrection courage. Scott Black Johnston, the pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, calls death “the toothy beast with the bottomless appetite, who sits back and declares that in the end everything belongs to him. Death”—Johnston says—“makes smug pronouncements and waits for us to crumble, waiting for the chemotherapies and the wars, and all the many hard things of life to wear us down. He waits for us to be left with nothing but fear. But, hear this, today we laugh at death. On this resurrection day, we stare at death's destructive powers and laugh, not because we expect to be spared in this life, but because we have hope...a trust that in the end fear doesn't win, even death, does not finally win.”

Almost always—almost always!—the fear is worse than the thing itself. Whether the thing we fear is death, or disability, or poverty, or humiliation. The handwringing expectation of the thing—the fear—is the worst part. An elderly gentleman was facing a very serious surgery. His doctors advised him against it, given his advanced age, but since his own son was a very accomplished surgeon, he decided to go forward with the operation—provided that his son would be the one with the scalpul. As he was lying in the operating room, awaiting the anesthesia, he said to his son, “Now I know it must be daunting to operate on your own father, but don't be nervous. Just do your best. And remember that if something happens to me...your mother is going to come and live with you and your wife.”

No, we may not get to see the face of God, or the face of the resurrected Christ. We may not get a Savior on a white horse. Luke only gives us these two guys in white clothes. They're not even angels, just guys. But there are times when a few guys in white will also do the trick. When you make your way through the garden in the morning mist, when you trip through the dark to the tomb where all your hopes have been laid to rest, when you come expecting to anoint a beloved corpse, pale and drained of color, with crusted blood in his hair...well, two strangers in white suits aren't a half-bad thing to discover! Two strangers whispering promises might not be a vision of the resurrected Lord, but it's a whole lot better than the thing you expected. The guys in white might not be an answer to all of life's questions, but they're a lot more pleasant than the broken shell of all your hopes. Resurrection occurs in the night, when no one is even looking, when we are all absorbed in grieving our losses or dreaming our troubled dreams. But we find traces of it in the morning. And those hints of resurrection, those occasional glimpses of new life are enough to move us from our sadness; they are enough to drive us from our fears and our grief into lives of joyful service. They are enough for now.

And you, with your bundle of crucified dreams! You, scurrying that well-worn garden path to the place where your hopes were buried—like those women in our Scripture reading! You who go about your days supposing that death still holds all things in its irresistible grip! Do you know that resurrection occurs in the dark, when you're not looking? Do you know that it comes without fanfare, usually without earthshaking visions? It comes in the same way the seed bursts quietly into life beneath the chilly earth—unnoticed and unknown. Do you know that there's a power loose in this world that defies even death—a force, a life that still makes all things new. After all these centuries, still it comes when you're not looking. If you'll have eyes to see it, it has the power to give you your life back. If you will hasten early to the tomb, you just might find traces of its reality. And that new perspective, that resurrection joy, can change the way you live, the way you love, the way you are in the world.

It may not quite feel like Easter today. It's still kind of cold. The earth is bare. We're not getting much in the way of visual aids. And on top of that, everything in our death-dealing, workaday world denies the possibility of resurrection. Everything that we hear on the news and sometimes even in the quiet of our minds denies the Easter proclamation that even death cannot undo our hope. There is a mystery, a power, a love that makes all things new. And yes, it sounds like “an idle tale” until you find it in the very place where you'd buried your dreams. Now here's your Easter task: Go back out into your world, your workplace, your home; go back to your family, your spouse, your neighbors; go back to your habits, your faults, your plans, and live like one who has been to the tomb and found it empty. Return to a world of crucifixions and fears, and live with the knowledge that death does not own you; it cannot control you. And so, happy Easter to you. Whoever you are, whatever your story, know that there is a power loose in the world that defies even death. Amen.