



"IT SEEMED TO THEM AN IDLE TALE"
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 65:17-25; LUKE 24:1-12
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
ASHEVILLE, NC
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The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
& Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

(Go to places during sung prayer for illumination. MMS is back, SGB to side aisle on piano side, RC on pulpit side)

Marcia: A Reading from Luke's Gospel *(RC gets up)*

Richard: Chapter 24, verses 1-12

Samantha: Listen for God's word for the church today.

(When MMS starts talking all three are moving toward the tomb. MMS down the center aisle, Samantha up steps, RC around Communion Table)

Marcia: But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

Samantha: They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

Richard: but when they went in, they did not find the body.

Samantha: While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

Marcia: The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them,

Richard: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

Marcia: *(walking toward congregation, stay on chancel)* Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

Samantha: *(move forward)* Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

Marcia: But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

Richard: But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Samantha: The Word of the LORD.

All: **Thanks be to God.**

Marcia: *(get chair out and take a seat)* But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them? *(pause)* I wonder why it was so hard for the eleven to listen to the two Marys and Joanna and the other women who were with them. With all the different ways Jesus had prompted the disciples. With the intensity of that moment, of their grief.

Samantha: *(get chair out and sit down)* Why wouldn't the eleven have wanted to believe?

Richard: *(get chair out and sit down)* Why was their first impulse to doubt?

Marcia: I am sorry, but it's kind of annoying that these women who had stood by Jesus through all the trials and travail were dismissed. I am so done with that whole dynamic--men not listening to women who are the very ones who had the experience themselves.

Samantha: It's not just the eleven who stand in the way of that direct experience, it's the way our minds work. When something is too much for us, we rationalize, we intellectualize, we hold it at a distance.

Richard: As long as we are talking about stuff that's annoying, it is annoying that the apostles themselves didn't even believe, but the church through the ages has put so much pressure on Christians to believe or else.

Samantha: Or else?

Richard: Or else you're not saved, that faith in Christ's resurrection is required for salvation, when the apostles, these forefathers of the faith, didn't have any faith at all on the very day of the resurrection.

Marcia: I have another thing to add to the annoying list: that so many Christian communities say women cannot preach to men, when women were the first preachers--the ones who actually felt a burning desire to spread the Good News!

Richard: Can you imagine how different things would be in the Christian tradition if they had just listened to these women?

Samantha and Marcia: Don't even get us started!

Richard: Ok, well here's your chance: (*pointing to the rock*) We're all ready to listen!

Marcia: (*stand up and MMS and RC walk forward*) Not so fast Richard. All Jesus followers have a story about Jesus' resurrection to tell. The problem is not a shortage of stories; the problem is our resistance, even our fear, to take the risk to believe.

Samantha: Wait, before we go too far down this road, didn't we talk about 'what resurrection means to us' last year?

Richard: What's wrong with repeating some of our greatest hits?

Marcia: While many a Presbyterian minister has tried their best to avoid preaching about Jesus' bodily resurrection on Easter, we will not succumb to that temptation. It's Easter! This sermon is going to be about Resurrection, just like last year's was, and the year before that! And I actually think we can even do better than last year! We need to do more than understand the resurrection intellectually, we need to find the courage to wonder aloud about what it means to be a witness to the resurrected Jesus?

Richard: *(sit down)* I've been wondering about this for a while now: is there some formula for the authentic experience of the resurrection? Is it the bright light, the vision, the visitation in a dream?

Samantha: *(sit down)* Is it a promise? Is it just hope?

Marcia: *(sit down)* Is it a myth, an illusion, an idle tale?

Richard: Maybe it's something people only think about on Easter morning.

Samantha: Or maybe we're called to think about it every day.

Richard: I experience it in all these ways, a promise, a fantasy, something I forget, something I cannot let go of. My experience of the resurrection is like an ever-flowing stream, changing with the seasons.

(walk down) I think it began when I was a young adult: a professor I really admired admitted on the last day of class that he didn't believe in life after death. It was funny; he compared us to mosquitoes; I remember, he clapped, mimicking killing a mosquito, and said that was it; we disappear. It was a really odd way to end a class on the Introduction to the New Testament.

But I think that's a pretty common belief. It's one I find myself tempted toward at times. When you hear someone just flat out deny the resurrection, you can't help but take that seriously. So, yea, there are times when I empathize with the apostles; I wonder if it all is another idle tale. That's got to be a common experience these days, but it was so profound to me at the time.

(come back to chancel) It was one of the first times someone just got up, and was real, and vulnerable, and spoke about his doubts.

And a New Testament professor no less! *(sit down)*

Marcia: Shoot! It wouldn't be seminary if your faith wasn't systemically crushed into a million pieces.

Richard: Yeah. But this was my freshman year in college, not seminary.

Marcia and Samantha: Oooh, that's harsh.

Richard: Honestly, it was a relief to hear someone share their doubts so confidently. Before then, I had thought doubt was something to be ashamed of.

Marcia: Christians are often told that doubt is a theological stumbling block; a dead end. But really, what is belief without room to doubt?

Sam: Absolutely. It's like what Walter Brueggemann says about doubt. He says it's like having "ants in your pants," it keeps your faith alive, awake and moving. It forces you to ask questions you may not have asked and consider what you authentically believe.

Richard: But faith isn't just about doubt or belief. Faith is about our connection with something beyond us.

Sam: Sometimes we can lean on the resurrection too much, and it can separate us from the pain and sorrow of this world – *(get up and walk out)* when we are actually called to engage. Resurrection can make us focus too much on what is beyond us and not enough on what is in front of us.

A few years ago a dear cousin of mine died from suicide. The funeral room was packed with people – everyone filled with this mixture of grief, anger and disbelief. I could not stop crying.

People kept coming up to me saying that I didn't need to cry anymore because my cousin was in a better place now – he was in heaven with Jesus. Part of me of course felt comforted in knowing that my cousin was safe and at rest, but the other part of me resented these remarks. Why should I not weep? Why should I not mourn? Why should we not talk about what's hard? My cousin had many demons, that's for sure, but he also was a showman – who made us laugh and feel loved. I missed him (I still do) and in that moment I did not want to pretend like everything was just OK.

Marcia: *(Walk down)* It's like people at the funeral were using resurrection as a way to avoid grief. *(SGB go back up to chair)*

Marcia: *(still talking to SGB and RC)* We can also avoid grief by not talking about the resurrection at all. I was so steeped in the intellectual layer of being Presbyterian--with a great grandfather, grandfather, and dad who were ordained ministers, and both parents being college professors. Would you all believe me if I said, we didn't really talk about the Resurrection much in my church growing up?

Richard: What do you mean you didn't talk about resurrection at church?

Marcia: *(toward congregation)* I mean, we actually didn't really talk about resurrection at church. It left me wondering, yearning for something more, for a way to engage the mystery of it all. And I think it was pain that created not just doubt, but denial, around Resurrection. My mom was only 21 years old when my sister died. It's before I was born, but it has shaped our family profoundly. Some of my first memories of Resurrection were in the pain. My mom and dad use to tell my sisters and me about the things people said after my sister, Allison, died. "God just needed another angel." "God has a plan." "It's not for us to understand."

When mystery is deployed this way, it hurts. So, I learned what we didn't believe about Resurrection by the way my parents talked about those painful statements.

We talked so much about what we didn't believe that we didn't ever really get around to what we did believe about Resurrection.

And my church was pretty silent on the whole thing. We talked about biblical criticism and Christian virtue, but I don't remember talking about what it means to choose to believe in eternal life in the face of such devastating loss. I learned through something very different than seminary professors and theological conversation, *(go up to chancel)* that believing in resurrection is a choice I make everyday. Believing changes what I am able to see, what I am able to feel, who I am able to be in the world. *(sit down)*

Richard: And believing isn't just a choice; it's also an invitation. Transcendence comes to us in many shapes and sizes.

Marcia: But without belief, are you even able to receive those invitations?

Richard: Y'all resurrection is hard! *(everybody sigh)*

Marcia: *(get up urgently, put chair away, walk back to Communion Table)* But there's something beyond all these explanations, rationalizations, and silences. There's something deeper.

Samantha: *(get up urgently, MMS put chair away)* Like these women, like Peter, there must still be a way, even today, to experience the resurrection. Otherwise, the story would have lost its relevance long ago.

Richard: *(Get up urgently, put chair away)* It's obvious that it still does. Look at all of us! We're here today! *(turn to congregation; MMS and SGB move to sit on the steps)* What is it about this story that still speaks to us? *(pause)* So, here's another story from college. Yes, I guess I'm just reliving the glory days this morning.

Almost at the same time as I had that experience in a New Testament class, I lost someone dear to me. Bryce was the father of one of the youth at the small Baptist church where I was working as a youth minister while in college. At Grace Covenant, we would call Bryce a youth advisor; we worked closely together.

Bryce was in his early 50s. He was a farmer, full of energy and life and humor. One night my phone rang, just after 2 in the morning, and Rebecca, Bryce's teenage daughter told me that her father had died suddenly of a heart attack.

I was in Chapel Hill. The Baptist church was in Stantonsburg, a 2 stoplight town in the Eastern part of the state, about a 2 hour drive away. Rebecca asked if I would drive her brother Will, who also was a student at UNC, back home, so he wouldn't have to drive alone, in the middle of the night, on the night his father died suddenly.

(come up to chancel) Sitting in the car silently with Will, I kept having this vision come to my mind: Bryce in a hayfield, the sun almost setting, wind rushing through his hair. Was it a thought? A wish? I still call it a vision. Over and over, I had this picture in my mind of Bryce. It was given to me, rather than something I imagined. Because it felt so much more than cognitive; it was visceral. Every time it entered my mind, even months, even years later, this feeling of peace accompanied it.

I mean, granted, I could explain this away: it was a coping mechanism, it was wish fulfillment, a psychological response to grief, a way of finding stability in the midst of such sudden loss and change. But I find all those explanations insufficient. It was real. It feels real, even today.

Sam: *(stand up)* You were given a vision that Bryce is still with you. That death could not break your connection.

Richard: Was this a foretaste of resurrection? An acknowledgement that Bryce was in the arms of God?

Marcia: *(stand up)* It's a mystery and an invitation. The resurrection will never lose its mystery. And God's transcendence can never be collapsed into our reality. But we can thank God when we are given just a glimpse of it.

Sam: So true. *(MMS and RC sit down)*

Samantha: The resurrection cannot be rationalized or measured, it requires faith and maybe even some imagination.

(go down into congregation)

I have recently begun digitizing old VHS home videos tapes. My father is a filmmaker and much of my life he was behind the camera – capturing day-to-day moments and milestones and these exuberant family gatherings we used to have. During this tedious process, I have come across so many sweet and silly moments that I am grateful to have on film.

Recently, I found some footage of my grandfather’s retirement celebration. He had owned a barbershop for over 35 years - and cut countless heads of hair from all across Brooklyn, New York.

(walk up onto chancel) The video follows my grandfather from behind as he walks through this long hallway and toward these two yellow doors. He pushes them open and then there is this eruption of joyful noise, and the room is filled with wide-eyed, smiling people with arms wide open - ready to receive him. As I watched mesmerized, I realized that almost everyone in the room (including my grandparents) are no longer living.

The scene was filled with all of my relatives, who have passed on – people I love, who I haven’t spoken to, or hugged or danced with in years. I thought to myself... maybe this is what the entrance to heaven is like. Maybe this is a glimpse of the resurrection.

Richard: *(stand up)* It sounds like God was speaking into that moment.

Marcia: *(stand up)* What an unexpected gift - to experience God’s grace in that moment of imagination.

Samantha: And I know we all have stories where resurrection is revealed. *(SGB and RC sit down)*

Marcia: *(go down to congregation)* When I was a junior in high school my grandfather fell during a presbytery retreat and slipped into a coma that he never woke up from. For days we gathered at his bedside in the ICU. The neurologist was a kind and gentle man. He told us what a fine man he could tell my grandfather was.

Days into our waiting and watching, it came time for me to go on a weekend retreat with my English class—*(back up to chancel)* a kind of “on Walden Pond” experience. I didn’t want to go, but my parents told me I needed to go on. Grampy’s condition could go on for a long time. There was talk of moving him to a nursing facility. He was not going to wake up, the doctor said. And he could live like this for weeks, months.

This was 1986 so there were no cell phones, no internet. And this Walden Pond experience for my English class meant that we would be away from civilization for 3 days. My last night there, I woke from a powerful dream. In the dream my grandfather came to me, just like you are here with me right now. He gave me one of his sweet hugs. I could feel the warmth, the love.

He always signed our birthday cards with our age in “squeezes.” Just a few weeks before his fall he had given me one with 17 squeezes written on the envelope where a stamp would have been for my 17th birthday. Grampy was a gentle granddad—my sisters and I adored him.

I woke from the dream and wept in the dark. It felt like he had been there with me. Later that day, we returned from our trip. My sister met me at the back door to tell me that my grandfather had died in the middle of the night.

The gift of my dream washed over me. A Holy moment, a real moment. I can’t explain it. I can only honor it and give thanks for the feeling I carry with me still—the blessed assurance, the taste of eternal mystery and unending love.

Richard: *(RC and SGB stand up)* What a gift in the midst of such a loss.

Marcia: In the midst of loss is what made such a deep and lasting impression on me.

Richard: Resurrection isn't about ignoring loss or taking a shortcut through loss. It is really about not being afraid to feel grief.

Marcia: That's right! *(turn around, walk to edge of Communion Table)* Good Friday doesn't get erased with Easter, it gets put into a broader tapestry of God's power to heal. There's a Mexican proverb that says it powerfully: "They tried to bury us. They didn't know that we are seeds."

Samantha: *(walk back toward Communion Table)* Resurrection is really about liberation, it's about freedom.

Marcia: In a world of pain and oppression, we need to live every day as Resurrection people. *(pause) (Walk forward)* "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb."

Richard: Where are you in this story?

Samantha: "For [God is] about to create a new heavens and a new earth."

Marcia: "No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime"

Sam: What is your story?

Richard: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox."

Samantha: "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD."

Marcia: Are you willing to risk believing that Jesus' resurrection is a part of your story? Is a part of OUR story? *(all together at edge of chancel now on same level)*

Richard: From time to time, we get just a glimpse, a fleeting moment.

Marcia: And then, afterward, it's up to us, to believe, to keep pointing toward belief.

Samantha: Believing that God is alive and at work in this world liberating, setting the captives free.

Marcia: Believing that death does not have the last word; that death has lost its sting.

Richard: It can take a lot of energy to clear a path to the empty tomb. (*walk down to second step*)

Marcia: We have to find our way through the distortions and explanations and silences of the Christian tradition.

Samantha: And we have to find a way to open our hearts and our imaginations to a mysterious story. (*walk down one step*)

Marcia: And choose to see the resurrected Jesus in our midst.

Richard: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale."

Samantha: "They found the stone rolled away from the tomb"

Marcia: Why do we look for the living among the dead?

All: Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!