

Idle Tales?  
Luke 24:1-12

Well, there it is – the best news that anyone could ever hear. The Lord is risen! So, why doesn't that good news transform the lives of everyone who hears it? Why doesn't everyone who hears the message of Easter instantly become a follower of Christ?

How, for example can we explain the disciples' initial reaction to what the women told them about the empty tomb? For the sad truth is that those eleven men who had been His closest companions did not meet this news with joy. Instead, those for whom His death had been the most crushing disappointment thought the women were just telling idle tales, speaking nonsense.

Why is that? Why did the eleven refuse even to entertain the notion that Jesus had risen from the dead? Well most obviously, it's because such things just don't happen in the real, material world, and Jesus' disciples were nothing if not worldly and materialistic. After all, they had stuck with Jesus for three years, experiencing His miracles and coming to the conclusion that He was in fact the Messiah their people had been expecting for so long. So, when He had ridden into Jerusalem in triumph, accompanied by joyful crowds, they were all expecting Him to assume political power over the Jewish nation and lead them in a rebellion against the Romans. And they naturally expected to be leading figures in the new state Jesus would use His miraculous power to set up. That's what made sense to them – worldly power and glory.

There are still lots of similarly skeptical people today, aren't there? We all know folks who go through life totally focused on the creation rather than the Creator, only interested in what they can see and hear and taste and feel. To such materialists, this world is all there is, so when people die, they die. That's it. We bury their bodies, and we get on with life as best we can until our turn comes around. All this talk about resurrection – well, it's nonsense, just as Jesus' disciples thought it was.

But there's another reason that the disciples dismissed what the women told them about the empty tomb: because it was women telling them these things. The recent "metoo" movement notwithstanding, ill treatment of women is nothing new. No, in the ancient world, women did not have anywhere near as much equality and respect as they do in modern America. In the Jewish culture of Jesus' disciples, women's testimony was not even admissible in religious courts, because it was assumed that they were simply unreliable.

And the fact is that many of those who continue to doubt the resurrection of Christ do so not only because they don't believe in anything supernatural. No, they also look down on Christians the way ancient Jews looked down on women. These skeptical sophisticates say Christianity is a mark of being uneducated, and that if we only knew better, we would reject religion as so much superstition. Yes, all too often, those who consider themselves the good and the great dismiss what Christians say about Jesus because they consider us to be among the deplorables of society. Like the eleven disciples, many people simply reject the message of the Resurrection because of their disdain for the messengers.

But let's give Peter some credit – for he decided to take the women seriously enough to check out what they were saying. And while he was on his way to the tomb, in fact before he even got there, he had put paid to most of the so-called scientific explanations of the Resurrection.

For think about it. Some modern skeptics say that Jesus didn't really die – He just swooned, and then was revived after an extended rest in the cool tomb. But if anyone was sure about the death of Jesus it was the women who went to anoint His body. It was the disciple John who came to the foot of the cross. And, just like all the other people in Jerusalem, all the eleven knew Jesus had been beaten so

badly He couldn't even carry His cross all the way to Golgotha. They all knew He had lost so much blood it was a miracle He survived long enough to be crucified. They all knew a Roman soldier had pierced His side with a spear just make sure He was dead. They knew this because all crucifixions were public events, intended to terrorize the population into obedience to Roman rule. The fact that the disciples dismissed the news of the empty tomb out of hand proves that they gave no credence to the "swoon theory." They knew Jesus had really died.

Other modern intellectuals say what the ancient Jews claimed – that Jesus' disciples had stolen His body and then lied about Him rising from the dead. Well, if anyone had been involved in such a bodysnatching it would have been Peter. So, if he and the rest of the eleven really had stolen and hidden Jesus' dead body, they would have believed what the women said about the tomb – because they themselves would have emptied it! Peter certainly wouldn't have needed to take a trip down to the tomb to check things out. And he certainly wouldn't have been amazed and astonished by what he saw there, or rather by what he didn't see.

And Peter's astonishment at the tomb brings us to the second reaction many people have to the Resurrection today. We've already seen that modern, scientific types continue to reject anything supernatural. But in our increasingly post-modern world, many folks are now more astonished, more amazed at the idea of supernatural things than they are skeptical of them. For example, more and more people today are looking to acupuncture and aromatherapy and homeopathic medicine and other remedies that can't be scientifically explained. Just so, these folks are quite open to the possibility of something like the Resurrection happening. Moreover, those who call themselves "woke" would never dream of dismissing the Christian faith simply because it happens to be most popular among the poor and the unsophisticated. Like Peter, many modern people are openminded enough to check out the empty tomb.

But like Peter, while they may be astonished at the possibility that Jesus rose from the dead, many of these post-modern people also leave the empty tomb without being transformed. For them, the resurrection is just another amazing event in history – like the storm that destroyed the Spanish Armada in 1588. So, while post-modern people are often quite willing to admit that the Resurrection might be true, they don't believe it has any real impact on their lives.

Why is that? Well, why didn't Peter rejoice at the possibility that Jesus might be alive? Probably because of his guilt. After all, on the night before He was crucified, Jesus had made one last prophecy – that Peter would deny Him three times before the rooster crowed the next morning. And in spite of Peter's protestations of faithfulness, he had in fact abandoned Jesus just like the rest of the twelve. And he had in fact denied three times that he knew Who Jesus was – Peter was even afraid to admit to a slave girl that Jesus was his friend. So, even if Jesus was somehow alive again, it didn't matter to Peter anymore. For all he knew, he had crossed himself off of Jesus' list, and he wasn't worthy to be one of Jesus' disciples anymore.

And that's the reason the Resurrection just doesn't make that much difference to many people today. Far from being self-satisfied sophisticates, they know their brokenness only too well – how they struggle with habits and hangups, how they have made a mess out of their relationships, how their desires are all too often self-destructive. Many people have done things that they're so ashamed of, they don't see how God could possibly forgive them. Oh, they're willing to admit that the Resurrection of Christ could be true, but they can't see how such a holy and powerful Person would want to have anything to do with them. They believe they aren't good enough to come to Jesus.

Other people in this post-modern age take the opposite tack. Because they believe that all truth is relative, they are perfectly willing to entertain the notion that Jesus really did walk out of the tomb. It's just that they think that truth is just for Christians, not for them. They prefer to make up their own belief system, to construct their own code of conduct, and to feel good about themselves when they fulfill their own expectations. They certainly don't want to become followers of Jesus, because they have no desire to live under anyone else's authority. After all, that might mean having to change some of what they believe or how they live. So, while they might be astonished at the miracles of Jesus and even the Resurrection of Jesus, it just doesn't mean anything to them.

No, given the skepticism of modern people and the despair and relativism of post-modern people, the disciples' reaction to the news of the empty tomb is perfectly easy to understand. It's easy to see why the Resurrection of Christ isn't really good news to so many people today.

But that's all the more reason why we need to do what the disciples refused to do at first – we need to listen to the women. For they had a complete different response to the news of the Resurrection, and for a completely different reason.

For why did the women believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead? In the first place because of what we read in verse 8 – unlike the disciples, they remembered Jesus' words, Jesus' own prediction that He would not only be crucified, but that He would rise from the dead.

And the Word of God is still a good foundation for our faith today. The best witness to the Person and Work of Jesus Christ continues to be the Scripture, from the Old Testament which predicts and explains why He had to die and to rise from the grave, to the New Testament which bears witness to His life, death, and Resurrection. If we'll stop insisting that everything make sense to us, if we'll turn away from our own despair and our own desire to construct the truth, and if we'll turn to the Scriptures, we'll find more than enough evidence that the Resurrection is true.

But even this is not enough – it certainly wasn't enough for the women. For we found in our responsive reading of Matthew's account of that Resurrection morning that Jesus didn't just send His angels to speak to the women and to remind them of what He had said – He also came to them. He showed Himself to them, alive from the dead. And as they took Him by the feet, the very feet that had been pierced with nails on the cross, they had undeniable proof that He really did walk out of that tomb. And as He showed Himself to those skeptical disciples that very evening, as He allowed them to touch Him, they had no more room for doubt. They knew the Lord has risen. He has risen indeed.

And no matter what the skeptics may say, Jesus' resurrection is still undeniable. There's simply no other way to explain how those eleven disciples who were so skeptical of the Resurrection at first became willing not only to suffer but to die rather than to deny that Jesus is alive from the dead.

And whatever those who believe in relative truth may say, if Jesus really is alive from the dead, that means everything else He said about Himself also has to be true. If He is alive, He is the Messiah, the ruler of all the world who deserves our complete obedience, no matter whatever desires we have to the contrary. If He is alive, He is the Son of God, the One Who spoke all things into existence, Who thus has the right to define who we are and how we live our lives. If He is alive, He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the only way to the Father, the only One Who can restore us to a right relationship with God through His atoning death and resurrection power. If Jesus is alive, nothing that denies His divinity or His authority can possibly be true for anyone, no matter how sincerely they believe it.

But what about those who don't think they're good enough for the Resurrection to be for them? What about those who are so broken that they can't see how God would want to have anything to do with them? That's the best news of all. For in today's passage, we see that Jesus first showed Himself

to the women, those who polite society thought were unimportant and unreliable. And then He showed Himself to those eleven cowardly, fickle, worldly disciples, the very ones who had denied Him and abandoned Him. In our responsive reading from Matthew's gospel, we find that Jesus was willing to come to them even in Galilee, where He knew that, in their weakness, they would run to try to get away from their enemies in Jerusalem. In short, Jesus came not to the great and the good, but to the least and the lost, to the weak and the unworthy.

And Jesus still comes to the same sorts of people today – to those who have abandoned all claims of prominence or importance and who are willing to bow the knee to Him as Lord. He still comes to those whose faith may be weak, to those who know they aren't perfect, to those who admit that they need Him as their Savior. It's to such people that today's news is the best we can possibly hear, news that will fill us with great joy: Jesus, our Lord and Savior is alive. He is risen from the dead. Is that good news for you?