

Easter Day  
8 April 2007  
St. Margaret's Church  
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To the Honor and Glory of God

*The Message of Easter: Luke 24.1-12*

When it comes to Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the New Testament is clear about two things: there is an empty tomb, and most people hear about Jesus' resurrection rather than see it for themselves. That is certainly true for us, if we think about it. Somebody told somebody who told somebody who told somebody who told us.

I want to put this to you in the form of a question: are you willing to hear the message of the resurrection, the message of life, from whatever source God chooses to use?

We will get back to the question in a few minutes, after we take a closer look at the gospel reading from Luke.

Luke's account of the resurrection begins with women coming to anoint Jesus' dead body almost twenty four hours after it had been placed in the tomb. These were the same women who had been following Jesus from Galilee, who had witnessed his crucifixion, and who saw where Joseph of Arimathea placed the body. Luke names them in verse 10 as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some other women.

The women find the tomb empty and the body gone. Two brightly clad men, probably angels (although Luke does not call them that), remind the women what Jesus said some time ago in Galilee, verse 6: "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." The angels really say very little about what has happened. Jesus had already told them everything they needed to know about these events.

The women went and told the apostles what had happened. Despite the facts that the apostles knew these women pretty well and that Jesus had trusted his life to these women, the apostles did not believe them. Luke writes in verse 11, "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

This is truly remarkable. The women have a direct report from heaven itself. They know the tomb is empty and some supernatural beings told them that Jesus was alive. They remembered the words of Jesus that helped explain it all. Still, the apostles did not believe their story. Even Peter, who runs to the tomb to verify things, does not believe, but rather goes home amazed.

The apostles probably did not believe the women for two reasons. First, they did not believe them because they were women. Despite all of the moves toward gender equality among

Jesus and his followers, there remained some male chauvinism in the group. That is pretty clear from the language of verse 11, “But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” Had it been men with whom they disagreed, Luke probably would have used different language.

In the apostle’s culture, women were not allowed to own property. They were not allowed to testify in a court. They were not allowed to be priests or rulers. Moreover, men generally viewed women as gossips and idle talkers. We hear Paul struggling with this image in some of his letters.

If God were going to get a message to the apostles, to Jesus’ chosen ones, then God would probably not use a woman. Why on earth would the men in Jerusalem believe the testimony of women, especially when that testimony seemed so ridiculous?

That brings us to the second reason the apostles did not believe the women: their story was crazy. It was absurd to think that the body would be missing, let alone to think that Jesus had risen from the dead. Those kinds of things just don’t happen. God does not work like that. These guys knew how God would act, and this was not one of those ways.

The apostles refused to believe the report because of the messengers and the message, and there is the challenge for us in this gospel reading. That is the challenge of Easter Sunday morning. Are we going to hear the message of life God gives to us, or are we going to discard it because we do not think it was delivered by the right source or because it is too far fetched?

I totally understand why the apostles stayed in the room and thought the women were crazy. I do some version of that behavior all of the time. It is that, I think I know better behavior. You know why they stayed in the room too. That is probably why Luke told the story this way, so we can see ourselves in the apostles.

When I was in my twenties in college, my grandfather died after a long, humiliating struggle with Alzheimer’s disease. He had not set foot in church in probably fifty years, although his was still a member of the German Reformed Church. In his long extended absence, the denomination had joined the United Church of Christ and there was a women pastor.

At that time I was still in the denomination in which my faith was forged (which was very much not my grandfather’s church), and we did not believe that women could be ministers. The bible said they should be quiet in church, and we took that to mean that they could not preach or hold authority in the church. I agreed with the position of my denomination.

You can imagine my difficulty when my grandmother asked the woman pastor at my grandfather’s church to do the funeral. I had a real struggle with it. How was I going to sit through the most important worship service in my life up to that point with a woman officiating and preaching?

Pastor Joan came out to the house and spent some time with my family over the days before the funeral. It was amazing how well she connected with us. She did not know any of us, yet she was compassionate and filled with grace. On the day of the funeral, she gave a lovely sermon in which she connected my grandfather's life to the gospel reading. It was pretty amazing for never having met the man.

My grandmother, while a devout Christian all of her life, hardly ever went to church. From that time on my grandmother went to that UCC every Sunday for the rest of her life. The care and love she received from that community in her grief was the message of life which drew her in.

As far as my conviction that women should not be ministers – well, I just had to get over it. Here was someone who was clearly filled with the Holy Spirit, called to ministry, and the possessor of spiritual gifts. She communicated to me and my family God's gift of life. The message of God's life and love came in a package I did not expect, and I almost missed it because of my prejudice.

A friend of mine in Boston is a priest and an alcoholic. It was not the church that helped him get sober. The church was too busy enabling his behavior and then judging him for it. When he got sober, it was the hand of other alcoholics that reached out to him. He told me that it was one of the oddest things to him that the message of life came not from the church but from people who had been drunks living in the gutters of Boston. The message of life sometimes comes in packages we might not expect.

I have a friend I went to graduate school with at Maryland. I left the program to become a priest, and he left about the same time to become a rabbi. Rabbi Jon and I stay in touch and visit from time to time. He teaches me about God's love for me and helps me see what God is doing in my life. He does not believe that Jesus walked out of that tomb. He is not a Christian, yet he teaches me about God's life.

When I was in seminary I studied in India for the summer. One night I found myself in a village of "Untouchables." A woman invited me and my translator into her hut. It was a small space made of thatch and palm branches. She had about a liter of rice and two eggs to feed her family of five, and she did not know where the next food was going to come from. In an act of hospitality, she gave me one of her two eggs. That Hindu outcaste woman taught me about God's hospitality that we celebrate on Easter Sunday morning.

You have experiences like these of your own. God uses situations in your life to give you the message of life. Sometimes God uses the painful and difficult things, and sometimes God uses the happy ones. There are all sorts of people who bear the message of life and love.

We must be very cautious about constraining the number of messengers God can use. Jesus is on the loose. You never know where the gift of life is going to come from.

Not only might we have difficulty with the messengers, but the message itself can sound absurd, or as Luke describes the apostle's view of it, like "an idle tale."

For those of us who live in fear, the message that we do not have to live that way can sound crazy. Fear is rampant. It is everywhere and in all of us. We fear that we are going to be found out. We fear that people are going to realize that we are not what we may seem. We fear that what we have done or did not do is going to be found out.

For those of us living with that kind of fear, the message sounds crazy that faith overcomes fear.

The message of forgiveness can sound like an idle tale to those of us holding on to our own sins. We believe that forgiveness is a great thing – for everybody but us. We hold on to the sins that God has already forgiven and we beat ourselves up with them.

We also hold on to the sins of others; we hold on to the things people have done wrong to us, whether it was five years ago or fifty. We think that if we can just hold on to those sins then we will have some power.

The message of forgiveness is that when we begin to let go of those sins and hurts, then we will feel the real power flowing in to us. Forgiveness frees us, yet the message can sound crazy.

But perhaps the greatest message of all on Easter morning, and the one that sounds the most crazy, is: welcome home. God spreads out the arms of love and welcomes us back home to God. The resurrection is about reconciliation.

This message sounds absurd to those of us who have spent a life wandering on our own. It sounds crazy those of us who have felt estranged from God. Welcome home, no matter who you are, what you have done, or where you have been. Your home is in God.

Let's go back to our original question. Are you willing to hear the message of God's gift of life, the message of God's forgiveness, love, and reconciliation – the message of life - from whatever source God chooses to use?

We cannot choose the messenger any more than we can choose the message. God gives the gift of life to us in all sorts of ways over the course of our lives. It is that message of life, of eternal life in Christ that changes us from what we are into who God calls us to be.