

“The Dream Is Not Done”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
Easter, April 8, 2007
Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

How would you begin to tell the story about Jesus? If you were commissioned to write a biography, or a screenplay, or had to explain Jesus to a friend, where would you start? The gospel of Mark begins with Jesus as an adult, going out to be baptized by John. Matthew starts with a genealogy. John goes back to the beginning of the cosmos. Luke begins with a bit of competitive zeal. I love the confidence, even the cockiness, with which Luke begins his gospel.

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)

“Hey Theophilus” – a Greek name that means “lover of God” – “Hey Theophilus,” Luke seems to say, “you have read some other accounts, but after reading my gospel all questions about Jesus will be settled.” Luke sounds a bit like a doctoral student about to write the best dissertation ever, the athlete predicting a big victory, the surgeon confident of good results, the politician predicting a landslide. “Hey Theophilus, read my version so you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

I like the confidence of Luke’s introduction because it gives us permission - it dares us - to compare the four gospels in the New Testament. And, as we hear Luke’s Easter account, we note some differences. There is no earthquake, as there is in Matthew’s account. The women encounter two men in dazzling clothes, not one, as in the other gospels. And unlike the versions in John and Matthew, Jesus himself does not put in an Easter morning appearance.

Easter can be a hard concept for some people. Perhaps it is the conflicting details in the gospels. Or perhaps it is the sheer unexplainability of resurrection. Perhaps, like the disciples, some think this an idle tale, just wishful thinking. Or perhaps it is the cynicism so prevalent in our time that says the only things certain in this life are death and taxes. We may not quite know how to approach Easter, yet we are left to grapple with our faith that is based on the claims about Easter. The Apostle Paul wrote, “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain, and your faith has been in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). Make no mistake about it, Easter is central to the Christian faith, but words often fail us in our feeble attempts at rational explanation. Martin Copenhaver wrote, “How odd it is that people flock to worship on this day. Easter seems not a day for beginners. In many ways Easter seems like the advanced course.”¹

Years ago I overheard a seminary student bragging that she had an activity that could prove to even the most skeptical adolescents that the only way to explain a pile of grave clothes

sitting neatly in a corner was that Jesus really did rise from the dead. Something about body temperatures and other pseudo-scientific details. I had to walk away. Easter is not about shaming skeptics, nor is it about scientific evidence that dispels all questions.

My friend Kim Clayton wrote,

While parishioners out there suspect Easter Sunday is our favorite day of the church year, bolstered as we are by the crowds and the lilies and the trumpets, we [preachers] know it is our most fearsome Sunday. . . We are looking for that story or image that will help us to speak clearly and convincingly of the resurrection to disciples today from biblical texts that feel as elusive as the actual event must have felt to those first witnesses.²

On *Speaking of Faith*, Krista Tippet interviewed an orthodox theologian who experiences Easter as a call to our senses.³ Daunted by the task of preaching on this day, we think that maybe we should just let the brass and organ play a bit longer, or have a time of silence and simply revel in the sight and smell of the flowers. For words are not enough on this day. As we read the gospel of Luke, we realize that words have never been enough on this day. Returning from the tomb, the women told the eleven disciples and all the rest what they had experienced. You might think a great celebration would have ensued. I mean, the women were sharing great news with those who knew Jesus so well and loved him dearly. “Alleluia!” they must have screamed, right? “We won!” “We’re going to Disney World!” Or whatever the first century equivalent. But words were not enough. The women shared their news with the eleven, Luke says, “but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11).

He was dead, after all. The dream was over. Herod and Pilate were just too strong, too powerful in the end. Pilate and Herod and all the other religious and political leaders thought you could kill off one man, to save the rest and keep the peace. That with a bit of torture, and a public execution, the revolutionary message Jesus proclaimed would be killed and put to rest. You can fight the empire, but the eleven knew that “The Empire Strikes Back.” They didn’t even

venture out to the tomb. They were probably hiding out, hoping that the ones who crucified Jesus would not go after his followers next. So when the women find them and tell them about the empty tomb and their encounter with those two men in dazzling clothes,⁴

the eleven dismissed them, “these words seemed to them an idle tale.”

Let’s back up. In Chapter 23 Luke describes the death of Jesus on the cross and says “all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things” (Luke 23:49). And Luke tells how a good and righteous man named Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body and took it down from the cross and laid it in a tomb. And the women followed, and saw the tomb and how his body was laid.

Everyone knows that the beautiful story full of revolutionary hope has come to its sad yet expected end. Pilate breathed a sigh of relief. The disciples who had believed Jesus when he said God’s kingdom was close at hand grieved his death and the death of their dream. The women, who had followed so faithfully, prepared for the grim routines of burial as soon as the Sabbath was over. They prepared spices and ointments and waited out the Sabbath. As soon as

day would break, they would pour the salts and fragrant oils on his body, not to preserve it, but to hasten its decay. After a year or so, only the bones would be left and would then be placed in an ossuary, a bone box.⁵

Maybe you have heard about a supposed discovery of an ossuary bearing the names of Jesus and other family members. As predictable as opening day in baseball, every year around Easter, big investigative stories about Jesus splash the covers of Time and Newsweek.⁶ Last year the Gospel of Judas, this year the ossuary of Jesus, even though this is not a new discovery. I am not an expert, but I cannot resist sharing a cartoon I saw of two scientists with magnifying glasses, brushes, and labcoats saying, “we might have to consider the possibility that it is a fake,” as the bone box reveals the names of Jesus, Mary, and Anna Nicole Smith.”⁷ I digress.

Let’s back up, again, all the way to Luke’s beginning. I always read Luke’s introduction as giving us permission to compare and contrast the different gospel stories. Rather than competing with Mark, Matthew and John, maybe Luke is more concerned about the accounts spread by “another storyteller loose in the world, one who preaches a half-gospel of Good Friday that cannot get past the hopeless finality of the crucifixion.”⁸

As I read through Luke this week, I was surprised to realize that his [Easter] account is peppered with the word *but*.

It’s as if Luke is grabbing us by the lapels, stopping us in our tracks and forcing us to understand that no matter what we’ve heard, we haven’t heard the whole story yet. So he begins that story in a curious way, with a tenacious conjunction.⁹

But. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb . . . “*But* when they went in, they did not find the body.” After seeing the two men, “the women were terrified . . . *but* the men said to them, “why do you look for the living among the dead.” Every time we think we know how the story ends, Luke says, “*but*.” With the women, we get our hopes up with the message of the two men in dazzling clothes, “*but* these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” “*But* Peter got up and ran to the tomb.”

Easter begins with *but*. You can kill Jesus, BUT God’s love and justice is stronger than death. You can put the truth in a grave, BUT it will not remain silent. You can abuse God’s vulnerable love and put it in a tomb, BUT you cannot keep it there. Every time we think we know the story has a tragic end, the message of Easter is BUT.

And so to those who despair that there is nothing new under the sun, God says on Easter, “Alleluia, I make all things new.” To those who are scarred and broken, Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). To those who daily battle cancer and Alzheimer’s and AIDS, the message of Easter is that God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4). And to those who are weary of war and terror and the sense that we must look out only for ourselves, Easter repeats the prophet’s dream of a time when “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4).

Though the problems facing our world are big, if Jesus is still alive our work is just beginning. To the disciples, Easter meant returning to the basics: feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison.¹⁰ Bill Moyers concluded a recent speech about democracy with this phrase, which can also be said about Easter. “The Dream is not done, the work is not over, and your time has come to take it on.”¹¹ Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!

¹ Martin Copenhaver, “Easter Nonsense,” in Journal for Preachers, Easter 2007, 20.

² Kimberly L. Clayton, “The Easter Texts: Getting Hold (or not) of Easter” in Journal for Preachers, Easter 2007, 3.

³ Krista Tippett is the host of Speaking of Faith, and her interview with Vigen Guroian, broadcast on 5 April 2007, can be found on www.speakingoffaith.org

⁴ Copenhaver, 19.

⁵ The beginning of this sentence uses wording from Dr. Jon Walton’s sermon, “No More the Sound of Weeping,” 11 April 2004 at the First Presbyterian Church of New York. The details on anointing bodies is from Laurence Jacob’s controversial article, “The Jesus Ossuary,” republished in March, 2007 (www.graal.co.uk.thejesusossuary.pdf)

⁶ I know I encountered this comparison recently, but cannot properly give credit.

⁷ The Christian Century, 20 March, 2007, 6. For more on the ossuary discovered, see the above citation for an article by someone who believes this find contradicts resurrection, and www.michaelsheiser.com/M%20Heiser%20Ossuary.pdf for a rebuttal.

⁸ Theodore J. Wardlaw, “Unnatural Event” in The Christian Century 20 March, 2007, 19.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ From Jesus’ parable of the judging of the righteous in Matthew 25:31-46.

¹¹ Bill Moyers, “A Time for Anger, A Call to Action,” in a speech given at Occidental College, published on 22 March, 2007 at www.CommonDreams.org.