

More Than an Idle Tale
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Luke 24:1-12

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I wonder how often that happened to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and those other women. Not being believed by the menfolk, I mean. Being dismissed. Talked down to. Does this ever happen to some of you? The women reported the world's most wonderful new—the resurrection of Jesus—and the male apostles did not believe them. Just an idle tale, they said. Some translations call the women's report “folly” or “nonsense.” *The Voice* translation is even stronger:

The Lord's emissaries (apostles) heard their stories as fiction, a lie; they didn't believe a word of it.

No, didn't really happen, the men said. He couldn't be alive. That's not the way the world operates. No, folly, nonsense, just an idle tale.

Nothing in either of the gospels suggests that those women expected to find an empty tomb. To the contrary, here's what they expected. First, they expected to find a dead body. That's why they went. They took the appropriate spices to prepare Jesus' body for eternal rest. They were good friends, and that was what a good friend would do. Second, they expected to find a huge stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. In fact, they worried about how they would gain access to the body because they expected the stone to be there.

So a dead body guarded by a large stone—that's what they expected to find. Instead, they found this. First, no stone. When they arrived at the tomb, the large stone was not a problem because it had already been rolled away from the entrance to Jesus' tomb. Then, no body. They walked into the tomb, but they could not prepare Jesus' body for eternal rest because there was no body. Then, there were those two men in dazzling clothes. Remember them? They are unique to Luke's account. When the women saw them, Luke says that they were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. And finally, there was the unexpected question. The men in dazzling clothes asked, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

They reminded the women of what Jesus had told them, that he would be handed over to sinners, crucified, and on the third day he would rise again. And Luke says that *then* they remembered. All of the sudden, they tied all the pieces together and realized what had happened. Jesus was alive, and they rushed to tell the apostles the wonderful news.

Luke says that the women told the “eleven,” meaning the twelve apostles minus Judas, and “all the rest.” In other words, they told the apostles and the other followers of Jesus who had gathered. I can see those poor women, panting, out of breath from running, trying to tell their news. “Slow down! Slow down!” someone may have said. “Just start from the beginning and tell us what happened.”

Imagine how they must have felt when John or Peter or one of the others dismissed them with a wave of his hand. Nonsense, they said to the women. Folly. Just an idle tale. But I guess they were used to it. You see, in the ancient Jewish world, women were often devalued and dismissed. Women couldn’t even give testimony in their court system. The eleven and the others heard their story that first Easter morning, but they dismissed it as fantasy. They just couldn’t believe this idle tale.

And according to Luke that is how the initial report of the resurrection of Jesus ended. Just an idle tale that no one, save a small group of women, believed.

And some of us still struggle to believe that report, don’t we? All these years later, like John and Peter and the others, we still stumble over this message of the women. Is it true, or is it an idle tale? I’m sometimes approached by honest, sensitive, intelligent people who say, “Pastor, I believe in God. No problem. I believe in Jesus and his teachings. No problem there either. But I honestly cannot bring myself to believe in the resurrection. That’s not how the world operates.”

Anybody stuck there? You want to believe, but that’s not the way the world operates, is it?

If you fall into that category, I’m glad you are here this morning. Your doubt deserves respect, and your honesty must be commended. I want to tell you about a man who helped me with this. His name is Marcus Borg. He died just a few years ago. He described himself as secular theologian.

Did you get that? A secular theologian, more specifically “a secular Jesus scholar.” By that he meant that he was committed as an academician to nonsectarian, non-religious study of Jesus and the world in which he lived. Borg taught in a secular university in Oregon and was committed strictly to uncovering truth about Jesus without any religious or devotional overtones.

Borg had a fascinating journey that he captured in a book titled *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. He argues that all of us in western culture have met Jesus. Jesus is in the air we breathe, whether we grow up in church or not. At some level we have all formed some impression of Jesus. Borg says that for many of us, as we mature, our childhood impression of Jesus no longer makes sense. Miracles? We don’t see that today. Dead people coming to life? Demons and spirits? What we were taught as a child becomes foreign to our experience as adults, and as adults we often are not given a persuasive alternative to replace our childhood faith.

As a young scholar, Borg abandoned the church, a period he called his “exile.” It was a time of intense struggle. As a Jesus scholar, the more he studied the Christian tradition the more he became convinced that it had a human origin, not a divine origin. And not just Christianity, all the world’s religions. He became convinced that they are all cultural products, not divine revelation. He could see how religions served psychological needs and cultural needs. And he says that he was alarmed by his own conclusion—that over the centuries we’ve just made it all up, each generation embellishing it just a little more.

Borg says that in the end there was one thing he could not throw away—the notion of God. So he focused his study on the nature of God. He says that he had a series of “*aha!* moments,” some awe-inspiring, wonder-evoking experiences of the holy. And he says that he could not deny that. He had experienced something and intellectual integrity would not allow him to dismiss it. He says that he discovered sacred mystery.

From that starting point, he moved backwards. He backed his way into a belief in Jesus. If God is real, then what does that say about Jesus? Borg says that through a long, arduous journey he met Jesus again but in an entirely new way. He moved from what he calls a childhood pre-critical naiveté to an adult (not critical) post-critical naiveté. This is how he described himself:

Now I no longer see the Christian life as being primarily about believing. The experiences of my mid-thirties led me to realize that God is and that the central issue of the Christian life is not believing in God or believing in the Bible or believing in the Christian tradition. Rather, the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points....

He said that if he ever wrote an autobiography he would call it *Beyond Belief to Relationship*. Unfortunately, he died before he wrote it.

I think he is right. We can become so stymied with all the intellectual head work about the resurrection that we miss the simple joy of this day. It's about a relationship, not figuring out how God did everything. It's okay to turn that loose and embrace sacred mystery. I'm sure that many of you don't struggle with this at all. You believe in the resurrection and celebrate it with great joy. I affirm and congratulate you. But there are some folks who get stuck right there. They don't want to be gullible, and yet they don't want to be wrong either. So they end up in a kind of suspended agnosticism.

Remember this—they didn't believe it back then either. To them it sounded like an idle tale. So they did this. They started where they were, with their relationship with Jesus. They remembered what he told them, and their relationship grew from there. They finally discovered that the report from the women was more than an idle tale.

That's a good place for us to start, too—with a relationship, a post-critical naiveté. Like Mary Magdalene, Joanna and the other women, we too must start with a relationship, with what we do understand and believe, and move from there. My hope for you is that it will be like meeting Jesus again for the first time.

Closing Prayer

Glorious, resurrected Christ, wise teacher of God, prophet, priest, and king, we believe; help our unbelief. Amen.