

“Fake News”
Luke 24:1-12; Isaiah 65:17-25

As I was working on this sermon, it struck me that as my retirement nears, my grandchildren, though attending here at Westminster, are too young to ever remember me as their pastor. And it got me to thinking about what I remembered about my grandfather, who was also a pastor. Today, we would call my grandfather a second career minister because before he went to seminary he taught school and owned a general store. Since he served churches in eastern Kentucky, we visited my grandparents often, as a boy growing up it felt like every single weekend.

But out of all those visits to churches in places in Kentucky like Paintsville, Prestonsburg and London, I cannot recall one single sermon my grandfather preached. I don't remember anything about his prayers, except that they seemed to me to go on forever. I do recall mandatory Saturday morning devotions that took me away from Saturday morning cartoons. And I can still see the ever present coffee pot sitting on the stove, continuously ready to provide my grandfather's favorite beverage.

My grandfather never served a large church, and with eight children was always struggling to make ends meet. I have no clue how “successful” he was in terms of new members or babies baptized.

But what I do remember is how people loved him, and how he displayed a genuine interest in and concern for each one of them. Watching him minister, converse, and care for other people it was easy to forget the trauma he experienced in his own life. His mother died when he was two, and a stepmother quickly replaced her. But her mothering was more attuned to discipline than nurture.

Of course, I never heard my grandfather discuss these things. Family stories concentrated on events such as my Uncle Gerald, the baby of the family, tearing three transmissions out of my grandfather's Packard, trying to drag race. Or, how all the children hated my grandmother's home baked bread growing up, and begged for it when they became adults.

But I knew there were other family stories seldom mentioned. My grandparents experienced the heartache of losing a little girl, Mary Esther, shortly after birth. Their eight year old son, Bobby, forgot to look both ways when he was crossing the busy highway between the house and barn on my great aunt's farm. A car struck and killed him. My Uncle Jay, bright, funny, happy go lucky, married with three children one day began to hear voices. Paranoid schizophrenia dominated his life from that time forward as my grandparents desperately searched for ways to help him and keep him connected to the family unit.

And in the midst of this pain, this grief, this personal chaos, I watched my grandfather preach, pray, live, love, and forgive every single day. Today, we talk a lot about mentors in business or a profession. I never thought about my grandfather in those terms. But the faith he preached became visible to me

because of how he lived. I knew Jesus was alive and real, I knew that the Easter story is true, because I could see how Christ worked in and through my grandfather's life.

Today is Easter. We know the story.

Jesus was crucified by the Romans on Friday. After Saturday's Jewish Sabbath, early Sunday morning, three women disciples come to anoint Jesus' dead body with spices. Seeing the large stone rolled away from the entrance, they enter, but do not find Jesus. Perplexed, they are all of a sudden confronted by two men in dazzling clothes.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they ask. "He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you..."

And verse eight says, "Then they remembered his words..."

Immediately, the women go straight to the eleven apostles and the other disciples. But their joyous expressions of resurrection are met with the skeptical belief that they are feverishly relating an idle tale. Otherwise, no one believed them. Only Peter rushes to the tomb to see the abandoned linen cloths for himself.

A guy goes to his barber and he's all excited. He says, "I'm going to go to Rome. I'm flying Alitalia and staying at the Rome Hilton, and I'm going to see the Pope."

The barber says: "Ha! Alitalia is a terrible airline, the Rome Hilton is a dump, and when you see the Pope, you'll probably be standing in back of 10,000 people."

So, the guy goes to Rome and comes back. His barber asks: "How was it?"

"Great," he says, "Alitalia is a wonderful airline. The hotel was magnificent. And I got to meet the Pope!"

"You *met* the Pope?"

"I bent down to kiss the Pope's ring."

"And what did he say?" the barber excitedly asked.

The man answered, "He said, 'Where did you get that crummy haircut?'"

The disciples wanted to be certain the women understood they didn't believe their crummy story.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

The story is old, told so often it is hard for us to hear it. We are no longer amazed, or perplexed, like those on that first Easter. Yet, this question is one that still rings a chime in our hearts and minds. When we look around us, we see people everywhere who are looking for the living among the dead. In fact, if honest, we know we are looking for the living among the dead.

For instance, we know that our job will not fill the void in our hearts. Work is good. It helps us feel we are contributing to society, aids us in buying life's necessities. But we also know that no one ever said on their death bed: "I wish I had spent more time at the office."

Former First Lady Barbara Bush once said, “At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, not winning one more verdict or not closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a friend, a child, or a parent.” Work in place of meals with our spouse or children does not strengthen our family. Work instead of worship slowly disintegrates our spiritual life.

Nor can money give us life. No question it can make some things better — a mini suite instead of an inside cabin on a cruise, leather instead of cloth seats in a new car, Clemson tickets a little closer to the field. But money does not nourish or heal relationships. It cannot bring goodness or light to the soul. And most often, its singular pursuit slowly spirals into greed, selfishness, a belief that there is never enough.

How often do we seek life in power, or prestige, or wrong relationships, all the shiny, alluring elements of existence that promise new life, and deliver only disappointment and death?

“Why do you seek for the living among the dead?”

The women approached the tomb to do what everyone did with a dead body, anoint it with spices. But God had changed the rules. Life was to be found in a very different place. Jesus was alive. He became a living presence, able to step into the heart and mind of all who follow Him. He is not just a historical figure, or a teacher of morals, or an example to be emulated, but a living presence that can fill the void in one’s heart and lead us into a life connected to God. We will be convinced of Jesus’ resurrection when we become aware of His presence in our lives.

The women believed when they remembered what Jesus told them. We remember how Christ forgave us of a terrible lapse of judgment. We remember how Jesus gave us the fortitude to handle a financial burden, a death, and still go on. We remember how God worked within our hearts to change a prejudice, made us more compassionate, more generous. Like the women, when we pause to remember, we realize how the risen Christ has been made real within our very lives.

Anna Quindlen, in her book, Loud & Clear, talks about how every part of raising children is humbling. She writes:

Believe me, mistakes were made. They have all been enshrined in the “Remember When Mom Did?” Hall of Fame. The outbursts, the temper tantrums, the bad language – mine, not theirs. The times the baby fell off the bed. The times I arrived late for preschool pickup. The nightmare sleepover. The horrible summer camp...

But the biggest mistake I made is the one that most of us make while doing this. I did not live in the moment enough. This is particularly clear now that the moment is gone, captured only in photographs. There is one picture of the [my] three

children sitting in the grass on a quilt in the shadow of the swing set on a summer day, ages six, four and one. And I wish I could remember what we ate, what we talked about, how they sounded and how they looked when they slept that night. I wish I had not been in such a hurry to get on to the next thing: dinner, bath, book, bed. I wish I had treasured the doing a little more and the getting it done a little less.

Most of us live our lives, physically and spiritually, just trying to “get it done.” But when we stop and remember, we can see and treasure how the resurrected Christ has worked in our past and will continue to do the same in our future.

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

That God raised Jesus from the dead is not that hard for us to believe. After 2000 years, we pretty quickly affirm this. But we also believe that by raising Jesus from the dead, God affirms Jesus’ life and his teaching. Today, what seems to us an idle tale is not so much the resurrection, but the things Jesus told us and showed us.

“Love your enemies.”

“Turn the other cheek.”

“Let your giving start at 10% of your income.”

“You will be judged by God according to how you supported the least of these.”

“Go to the back of the line instead of being first.”

“If you want to lead others, be their servant.”

These are the things that seem to us an idle tale. In fact, these demands by Jesus came closest to what the original text actually says. The New Testament was written in Greek. And the Greek word translated as “idle tale” was the one Greeks used to describe the ranting of a person suffering from delirium. It wasn’t just an idle tale; it was “fake news.”

And let’s be honest, that’s what it sounds like to us. Forgiveness instead of revenge, giving away copious amounts of money, worrying about how the poor, the sick, the physically challenged eat, where they sleep, whether they get health care. Everything within us wants to cry out, “What about me?” While Jesus keeps replying, “What about them?”

The resurrection proclaims that Jesus was right. It is God’s confirmation that a life of love, forgiveness, compassion, generosity, and service is a divine life, a holy life, God’s life.

But it also tells us that when we live this way, God does not forsake us. Just as God did not abandon Jesus, neither does God leave us. The resurrection confirms God’s presence with His people in this world, and the next. The

resurrection is a pledge, a commitment, a promise, that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will do the exact same thing for you and for me.

J. Barrie Shepherd is a retired pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of New York City. In a sermon some years ago, he told the story of a time when he was flying back to the USA from his native Scotland. It so happened that Shepherd was carrying back, for his church, a large metal Celtic cross from the Isle of Iona. He had wrapped the cross carefully in layers of paper and padding. Not trusting the baggage-handlers, he decided to carry it onto the plane himself. As he approached the x-ray machine, the guards eyed him with suspicion. What was this item this man was carrying, that was of the same size, and similar shape, as an automatic weapon? When the image of a two-foot-tall Celtic cross appeared on the x-ray screen, the guards relaxed.

Early the next morning, Shepherd and his fellow passengers made their way into the customs area of New York's Kennedy Airport. "Do you have anything to declare?" asked the customs agent.

"Only this cross," said the sleepy-eyed pastor.

The agent looked down and scribbled something on a form in front of him that read: "Item of a sentimental nature. Of little or no value."

For some, the cross and resurrection of Christ may seem to possess little value, to be an idle tale, fake news. But for those of us who believe, they are the very presence and promise of Almighty God.

"Fake News"

That's how the apostles and all the other disciples saw the women's proclamation of Jesus' resurrection. Our translation says, "it seemed to them an idle tale." Other translations read, "they thought it was nonsense" or "it struck them as sheer imagination." But none of these capture the blatant disdain or dismissal of the women's words. They thought it was "fake news."

And, so do we. Loving our enemies, forgiving those who intentionally hurt us, giving away our hard earned money, everything within us and around us argues against this behavior, these ideas, this crazy talk. Everything except the risen Lord, the one who conquered sin and death, the One whose life of love, forgiveness, and service has reverberated through the hearts and minds of those who have followed him for the last 2000 years. We believe the resurrection is true when we experience the presence of Christ working in our lives, and we witness in the behavior of others. To some it is fake news. But to those who believe, it is the very power and presence of God himself.

Today, for you, is the Easter story "fake news" or has Christ risen in your life?

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