

“Idle Tales and Easter Stories”

Luke 24:1-12

Easter Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville

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Do you remember the last time we were here, in this sanctuary, worshipping together on Easter?

Three years ago this month, 2019!

I’m tempted to just stand and look around at all the faces here today, savoring this gift, worshipping with you...

In fact, I was savoring this gift before I stood in the pulpit today.

Some of you may know that in the waiting sacristy of our church, there is a small screen, a monitor on which you can watch what’s happening in the sanctuary before worship begins.

So this morning, I was watching a number of you as you entered the church.

- Some of you were here a good 15 minutes ahead of time.
- Some of you were doting over your children, letting them lead the way to your seats.
- Some of you were walking a little briskly, hoping to find your seat before the service began.

But I did not see anyone **RUNNING** into church this morning! Why wasn’t there running, after three years of not being in the sanctuary on Easter?

Well, I can already hear some of you say:

“Ben, we’re Presbyterians! We do Easter decently and in order!”

Fair point.

But I think I didn't see you running because you already knew what you'd hear today.

Christ is risen!

No need to race through the doors, wondering what the message is going to be.

Christ is risen!

Everyone knows that's the message at Easter.

You and I may not remember the details of three years ago, but we all know what Easter has to say.

Christ is risen!

No need to race into church, grab a seat...because you've heard this news before.

Funny thing, though—

that's exactly what the women are told at the tomb:

not just Christ is risen, but—
you've heard this news before.

The women go to the tomb, according to Luke, expecting to find the dead body of their beloved rabbi and leader and friend.

Instead, they find two men, dressed in dazzling clothes.

They say to the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 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."

*Then, Luke writes,
they remembered his words...*

The little girl thought about that for a moment, then rolled her eyes heavenward and announced to all those seated around her:

“Oh goodness!
Poor God!”¹

A silly story, perhaps, but let’s run with it.

In that little girl’s memory, Aunt Gladys would always be Aunt Gladys!

**In her mind, the way things are right now
is just the way they’ll always be...**

Which is the same trap that the disciples fell into when they heard the news about Easter.

The women return from the tomb, and they tell the eleven what they’ve seen and heard.

And Luke writes:

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

In other words, death gets the final say, Jesus is gone,
Good Friday is just like any other Friday,
and nothing about the world is going to change.

The way things are right now is just the way they’ll always be.

But Easter teaches something else.

¹ For this story, I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, “Do Not Be Afraid,” preached on April 4, 1999 at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL. In Dr. Buchanan’s sermon, the character was a boy instead of a girl.

Easter says *that the way things are right now is NOT the way they'll always be.*

All the evil, all the chaos,
 all that the powers of Sin and Death can throw
 the world's way...well,
 the Resurrection of Jesus says
 that all this will be redeemed.

Which gets to the first thing I think you and I forget at Easter.

The FIRST thing that you and I usually forget about Easter is that Resurrection, according to the Bible, is an act of God's justice. A way for God to set things right.

Now I know...we don't usually equate Resurrection with justice.

But it's how the biblical prophets described it.
 And it's how the Gospel writer Luke would have understood it.
 Luke was very familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament prophets.

As the retired Harvard professor Harvey Cox puts it:

"...stories of raising the dead in the Old Testament....did not spring up from a yearning for life after death, but from the conviction that ultimately a truly just God simply had to vindicate the victims of the callous and the powerful."²

Which is exactly what Jesus was!
 Someone who died at the hands of the callous and the powerful!
 Someone who died UNJUSTLY.

² Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

The Son of God died as criminal, accused of sedition, and hung on a cross.

To raise Jesus from this kind death, in Luke's mind, was an act of God's justice. A way of saying that the life that Jesus lived was vindicated. That it's the kind of life all of us are called to live, no matter what it costs.

And it's a powerful thing when we see someone who not only remembers that Easter truth, but lives it out in their faith.

Miroslav Volf, who teaches at Yale Divinity School and was a Heritage Lecture speaker here at Westminster years ago—

Volf recently spoke, on his podcast, with a former student of his, Fyodor Raychynets, who is now a pastor and professor in Ukraine. I say—a pastor and professor—he still is, although the interview occurred on the same day that his seminary campus had been destroyed by missiles. He no longer has an office. His library? Gone, all the books destroyed.

The interview took place after Pastor Raychynets had spent the day not teaching students,
 but feeding the elderly and the sick,
 reaching out to weary Ukrainian soldiers
 and going to women and children stuck in basements
 without electricity or clean water.

The interview is one of the most amazing testimonies to Easter faith in the 21st century that I have ever heard.

In one fascinating exchange, Volf affirms this, telling his former student:

“You are a person of strong faith...
providing witness to Christ’s death and resurrection.”

Raychynets replies:

“...I don’t think that I’m a person of...strong faith...it is challenging to sustain faith in [a] situation where there is a sense that you cannot control anything that is happening.

“...in the morning you [wake up and] want to do nothing...sit in some safe place.

“But then you remember these people
and you remember their needs,
and then you get some phone calls...

Someone needs your presence. Someone needs your smile.
Someone needs your heart.

And these are not your relatives.

These are people [whose] existence you did not know about a few days ago...but there is [a] bond with these people.”

And so Raychynets goes...he finds food for them, he smiles at them, he spends time with them, the most vulnerable people in his country at this moment.

Raychynets says he has friends in England, in Canada, who keep trying to talk him into leaving, to come live with them. He won’t leave.

Says Raychynets:

“If I die...it will be for a [just] cause...”

“...it is funny how...we say we are from the church [because] I think that those people, they will remember that.

“The war will stop. This madness will end sooner or later, but [they’ll remember] there were these crazy people from the church...
 bringing chocolate, bringing coffee...
 telling them that we pray for them on a daily basis...”

“I believe that we are just the instrument in this kind of situation. And there is a much bigger, invisible presence of God’s grace which can do something that we cannot do.”³

Did you catch what Fyodor Reychnets said in the beginning?
 That he’s tempted every morning just to find a safe place...
 but then, he remembers...

He remembers the people, he remembers their need.

Easter faith is an act of memory.
 Remembering to work for justice, yes, because the justice of God was made known in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But also remembering that bigger,
 invisible presence of God’s grace surrounding us,
 doing that which we cannot do ourselves.

³ From Miroslav Volf’s interview on the podcast “For the Life of the World,” found at [A Voice from Kyiv: Fyodor Raychnets / Faithful Presence in the War on Ukraine | For the Life of the World / Yale Center for Faith & Culture \(simplecast.com\)](https://www.yale.edu/faith/culture/for-the-life-of-the-world).

If you were going to pick a word to go with “grace,” what would it be?

Comforting grace? Yes.

Helpful grace? Absolutely.

Strengthening grace? Of course.

God’s grace is all those things.

How about this?

How about...WILD grace?

I think sometimes, that’s the second thing we forget about the good news at Easter.

That there’s something wild,
 something that cannot be contained,
 something that is impossible to
 DOMESTICATE...when it comes to the grace of the living God.

Let me approach it this way.

There’s a video that went viral a number of years ago on YouTube. It’s about a lion named Christian.

You can find different versions of the video, including one with background music by Aerosmith, it all comes from a documentary.

Anyway, the year was 1969, and two young men in England find a little lion cub in a crate. This cub is going to be sold, to who knows where...so they buy it. They rescue it.

They bring it back to a local church that has a large, enclosed cemetery.

Christian the lion get up on his hind legs...and he HUGS THEM.
He LICKS them!

In the middle of the African wilderness, Christian remembers them...this wild lion, reunited with the two men who loved him...and then, he introduces them to his family, to his pride.

In other words, he claims those two men as his own!

Can I put it like this?

In a whole different dimension, this is EXACTLY what happens with the grace of God at Easter.

God runs to you.

And God claims each of you, and your loved ones, and every child of God, as God's very own. And that means something very important today.

- If your loved one is going through a devastating illness right now...
- If a person in your family is struggling with addiction right now, or battling his or her own demons right now...
- If you are grieving a loved one's death, wondering how you can keep going forward in faith right now, just remember...the wild, untamed grace of God is NEVER defeated by death, or the demonic—in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has said: ***Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. You are mine! You belong to me!***

The Presbyterian minister Scott Black Johnston reminds his congregation, just about every Easter, that he has a friend who calls him up every Easter to remind him of the wild nature of God's grace.

His friend does it in a very particular way.

When Scott Black Johnston answers the phone, no introduction is given on the other end.

No small talk, no catching up on the kids.
Instead, the voice on the other end just says this:

Jesus is on the loose.

And then...he hangs up.⁴

Can you imagine getting that phone call?
What if Leigh, Lauren, Julia, Mary Kathleen, Amos and I
called you today,
did not identify ourselves,
and just said to you:

Jesus is on the loose.

And then we hang up.
How would you respond?

Would you call an emergency meeting of the Session, because your pastors were engaging in strange phone calls?

Speaking of the Session....what if I asked the Session to start doing it every Easter? Just go through our directory, and divvy up the households, and make sure every household hears the words:

“Jesus is on the loose.”

⁴ From Scott Black Johnston's sermon "Take Your First Right at the Cemetery," preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, on Easter Sunday a number of years ago.

Ah, I can see some of you thinking—this is silly.
It's Easter. We don't need a reminder of that today.
But there just might be a day when you will.

A day when you have exhausted all your options.
A day when it feels like chaos, death, FEAR—
has claimed you as their own.

And you will need to be reminded:
THAT is the idle tale.

Sin and death, chaos and fear...
they will never claim you as their own.

Because Christ is alive in each of your lives today.
He is at work in this world.
His wild, untamed grace is on the loose.

Christ is risen!
Alleluia!

Amen.