

"An Idle Tale"  
A Sermon Preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church  
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17 April 2022 - Easter Sunday  
Isaiah 65:17-25  
Luke 24:1-12

Isaiah 65

<sup>17</sup>For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. <sup>18</sup>But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. <sup>19</sup>I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

<sup>20</sup>No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. <sup>21</sup>They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. <sup>22</sup>They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. <sup>23</sup>They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well.

<sup>24</sup>Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

<sup>25</sup>The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

## Luke 24

<sup>1</sup>But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup>They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup>but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup>While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup>The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. <sup>6</sup>Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup>that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” <sup>8</sup>Then they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup>and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup>Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup>But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup>But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

## I. Introduction

One of things that I find fascinating in the study of American history is to trace all the changes that have happened since my birth year. I will never forget learning about all the things I take for granted these days that weren't extended to women until after I was born. And, sadly enough, some of these things are baked into our American system. For example, US News and World Report reports that in 1769, the 13 colonies adopted "the English system decreeing women cannot own property in their own name or keep their earnings," and in 1777 "All states pass[ed] laws which take away women's right to vote" (see [Timeline: The Women's Rights Movement in the US | The Report | US News](#), access 9 April 2022). And while that status quo wasn't permanent, change didn't come quickly. Title IX, a prohibition of sex discrimination in Federally funded education programs is passed in 1972. Housing discrimination on the basis of sex is outlawed in 1974, as is the right for women to have credit cards in their own names without needing the husband to be a co-signer. And starting in 1975, women are even allowed to serve on juries. Yeah, I did say that with a slightly snarky and sarcastic tone, didn't I??

Nor should we be surprised by that. Even during New Testament times, women were considered to be unreliable witnesses or testifiers to something that had occurred. The Jewish historian Josephus, for example, wrote that "From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex"

(Josephus, Ant. 4.8.15 §219) because "The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior (χείρων; see LSMJ 1986; BDAG 1083 for the semantic range of this term) to the man" (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.200; see David Instone-Brewer, <http://www.biblecontexts.com/2019/10/morality-ch-14-wifely-submission.html>, accessed 15 April 2022). In similar fashion and from the same social and cultural mindset, the Jewish scholar Philo wrote that "the female sex is irrational (ἄλογον; see LSMJ 72 for other occurrences of this word in classical Greek with the meanings "unreasoning," "irrational," "absurd" and BDAG 48 for its use in the NT and related literature, usually with the meaning "[pertainig] to lack of reasoning capacity, without reason of animals") and akin to bestial passions, fear, sorrow, pleasure and desire, from which ensue incurable weaknesses and indescribable diseases" (Philo, *Questions and Answers in Genesis* 4:15; both texts cited in ZIBBC: 495). Given that cultural and ideological background, it is amazing that the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection were women (so the NET note to verse 10: "It is unusual that the first appearance would involve women as in this culture their role as witnesses would not be well accepted")! But I'm getting ahead of myself, as I am so often prone to do, so let's take a step back and assess where we actually are.

## IIB. Pivot to Luke

On Palm Sunday last week, we read eight selections from Luke 19 through Luke 23, ending with Sandy's reading of Luke 23:1-25, which in turn ends with Jesus being handed over to the Jewish religious leaders so that they can crucify him: "But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. <sup>24</sup>So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand

should be granted. <sup>25</sup>He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished" (vv 23-25).

What was left unread and unsaid last Sunday was the crucifixion of Jesus itself, because we traditionally reflect on that event on Good Friday. So in Luke's gospel, we read of Simon the Cyrenian, who bore Jesus' cross; of the "great number of the people [who] followed him, ~~and~~ among them ~~were~~ women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him"; of the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus, one on Jesus' left and one on Jesus' right; and of Jesus crying out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (verse 46). Verses 50-55 will describe how Joseph of Arimathea requested and received the body of Jesus from Pilate; wrapped it in linen cloth and laid the body of Jesus in a tomb; and how Luke's attention turns once again to the women in Jesus' life and ministry in vv 55-56: "The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. <sup>56</sup>Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment." That is how the report would have ended had there not been an Easter Sunday.

But thanks be to God, there was indeed an Easter Sunday. Verse 1 continues the chronology from the end of chapter 23: "On the sabbath they rested ... But on

the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared." In Jesus' day, the Sabbath was the period from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, and the first day of the week is the period from Saturday sundown to Sunday sundown. Hence, early dawn (ῥῆθρου βαθέως; BDAG translates "very early in the morning" [723], Louw-Nida 67.73 translate "at early dawn") would have been the first reasonable chance to get to Jesus' tomb and to anoint his body with the spices (ἀρώματα; note that there is no mention of the "ointments" [μύρα] of 23:56) that these women had previously prepared. What do they find when they get to the tomb? They found (εὑρον) that the stone in front of the tomb (not mentioned in Luke 23, "but he speaks of it as well known or as usual" [Plummer, ICC 547], though affirmed in Matt 27:60 || Mark 15:46; scholars are unsure as to why Luke has omitted this detail. Marshall NIGTC 884 suggests that "Luke's narrative introduces the stone on the assumption that his readers were familiar with Jewish modes of burial—a possible sign of pre-Lucan tradition"; Bovon, Hermeneia 3 348 wonders whether "the evangelist does not want to distract from what is essential, the message of the angels") has somehow been rolled away but they did not find (οὐχ εὑρον) the body of Jesus where they expected him to be (vv 2-3). And in the midst of what had to be a great mystery for them, they are met by "two men (ἄνδρες δύο) in dazzling clothes" (v 4). They respond as I suspect you or I or anyone else would - they were terrified (ἐμφοβῶν) and bowed their faces to the ground in an act of worship, or submission, or fear - or all of the above. But these men aren't there to kidnap them or torture them or abuse them in any way. These men have a message for the women: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here,

but has risen. <sup>6</sup>Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup>that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again” (vv 5b-7). It isn't clear what these men are referring to when they say, "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee"; are they referring to a specific prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection (e.g., Luke 9:22, 44; so Bovon Hermeneia 351; Carroll NTL 477; Plummer ICC 548 adduces additionally 18:32-33, but Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem in that chapter [see Luke 17:11], not in Galilee), or are they referring to the dominant theme of his private preaching (so, apparently, Nolland WBC 1190 ["For Luke, the call to remember is important because for him the significance of the resurrection is inseparable from Jesus' prior announcement of the necessity of both his suffering and his vindication as Son of Man"]; Fitzmyer AB 1545; Green NICNT 838)? But that lack of clarity isn't all that important. All four Gospels depict Jesus as one who knows that "the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." What is more important to Luke is the affirmation that these women were a part of Jesus' inner circle and would therefore have had access to this information.

And so the women do what you or I or anyone else might have done in their situation - they run back and tell (but note that Mark 16:8 says that "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid," a clear difference with the Lucan narrative) the eleven remaining disciples - the Twelve minus Judas (there is a disconnect here since Judas' death is not reported in the gospel of Luke and it is not until we get to Acts 1:16-20 that we read about Judas' death, an account that differs from the death reported in Matt 27:5 [and he (= Judas) went and hanged himself]; so correctly Carroll NTL 478 ["the permanent

loss-by-defection of Judas Iscariot, a recognition left implicit here but later made explicit in ... Acts 1:16-20"].

Neither Mark nor John contain any tradition about the death of Judas), and all the rest, whoever and however many that "rest" might have included (Fitzmyer AB 1546 thinks that "Though no hint is given as to who these might be, this is a Lucan addition to prepare for the Emmaus incident"; Green NICNT 839 cites Acts 1:12-15, implying that "all the rest" of Luke 24 refers to the others who made up the 120 believers mentioned therein). And after three of these previously unnamed women are named, we get the reaction to their testimony that we would expect: "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Why would we expect it? Well, in the first place dead people don't typically come back to life 36 hours later; and in the second place it was women, a group of people thought to be irrational and therefore unreliable and untrustworthy by the larger culture, that was telling them this idle tale, this story of a miracle that just couldn't happen. All except for Peter, since verse 12 tells us that "Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed (θαυμάζων) at what had happened."

And there, our reading ends.

### III. Pivot to Today

But while our reading ends here, the story of the resurrection is just beginning. It has often been said that as one chapter ends, another chapter begins; and I often hear people saying that when God closes one door, another door opens. Easter Sunday falls into that exact same pattern. The gospel story ends with an



empty tomb and a Risen Savior but the New Testament is just beginning. The importance of Easter Sunday does not end with the return to life of the Crucified Messiah. Easter is also important because it is God's reaffirmation of Isaiah's ancient prophecy of a new heaven and a new earth, a place where there will be no more weeping and no more cries of distress; a place where our former misfortunes and disappointments will no longer be remembered or be brought to mind. It will be a place where everyone will be full of peace, full of joy, and full of security. For Isaiah, that hoped-for place was here on earth. How do we know that? Because he refers to people living until a hundred, to planting and reaping, to sowing and harvest - all the things that people do in an agrarian society when they are safe and undisturbed.

The New Testament will take Isaiah's vision of the new heavens and the new earth one step further. The last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, tells us that "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>he 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." <sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making ***all things new***'" (Rev 21:3-5).

That is the full and final meaning of the resurrection of Jesus and thus the full and final meaning of Easter Sunday. It is God's promise of a better place for all God's children, a place with no more crying, no more hurt, no more pain. A place where all the trials and the travails of this life will come to an end because of the new heavens and the new earth that God has started to create and that God will one day, finally and ultimately, finish for all God's children. It is God's revelation of what will happen at the end of history, no matter how long it takes to get there, no matter how bleak our circumstances appear to be. It is God's down payment on a life in which there will be no more no more pain, no more suffering, no more heartache. No more death, no more mourning, no more weeping. The toxic polarization of the church? Gone. Arguments and separations based on our prideful embrace of this or that theological or moral point? Over. The endless debating and finger pointing around the identification of the "good" quote unquote Christians and the red-letter tarring of those who are the "fake" quote unquote Christians? Done. The heretical invocation of the Christian faith in support of secular political ideologies? No more. The only thing that matters will be the only thing we do: the joyous worship of God and celebration of the Lamb of God who sits on the throne of God forever and ever, amen.

And *that* is worth remembering, today, tomorrow, and forever. *That* is worth celebrating, today, tomorrow, and forever. And *that* must be our unfailing

source of hope, and comfort, and joy in this life when this life gets difficult, painful, and unbearable. When we are isolated and alone, lacking any human comfort, company, or compassion. When we wonder where God is and if God cares.

So may we always remember Easter's reminder that Jesus *is* risen from the dead and that ***God has and God will triumph*** over sin and death, over hate and oppression, over Satan and all the forces of evil in our world today. Hallelujah! And Amen.