

“Hints of Resurrection”
Luke 24:1-12
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Easter Sunday
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The first people to disbelieve the resurrection are some of Jesus’ closest followers. The women who go to the tomb, those without official titles, have experienced hope but the rest of Jesus’ followers are still wallowing in their loss. It’s kind of familiar given where the church is today losing members, losing clout, losing its pep. The text doesn’t tell us where the disciples are, but I’m imagining they’re gathered somewhere behind closed doors. That’s where we find them later in Luke’s story. That’s often the place where churches begin losing their hope. If you stay too long behind closed doors, you end up losing your sense of purpose and the community it generates.

I know this from being cooped up during blizzards and rainstorms, and from 12-hour days of driving across the country with my family. It doesn’t matter how much you love each other, even the closest family needs to get out from behind closed doors and interact with the rest of the world. I’ve also witnessed it in churches obsessing over the placement of their furniture or complaining about the limitations of their preacher while the world outside goes hungry for good news. It’s important to grieve our losses, but we can get stuck there. Preoccupation with loss can blind us from the hope that God delivers right before our eyes.

That hope word is important, but it also make me nervous because hope is so closely connected to belief. I’ve spent a lot of years of ministry diminishing the importance of belief because the church has had hundreds of years of emphasizing almost nothing else. Belief in Jesus has become a kind of get out of jail free card that Christians play to excuse ourselves from actually living lives consistent with that belief. Presidential campaigns provide some of the worst examples of this two-faced religion. It’s shocking the number of candidates who treat Jesus like someone who has endorsed their anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner, anti-gay, racist agenda when anyone who knows Jesus, knows he welcomes pretty much anyone, especially people rejected by religious folk. And it’s shocking the way Christian people suddenly embrace “helping the middle class” and “strengthening national security” as our primary work when Jesus spent his time with and for the poor. Through the years I’ve become less interested in people who parade their belief in Jesus and more interested in people who follow him.

This seems to sit well with our particular congregation since there are plenty of new church officers and recently confirmed teenagers here who, when forced to give a faith statement, begin with some version of “I’m not sure what I believe about Jesus,” followed by honest questions about the virgin birth, supernatural healings, the divinity of Jesus (or not), and the resurrection. When you strip all of that away

as we often do at Brown Memorial, we are left with the teachings of a good and principled man, an approach that fits well with our culture, and with people we love who are part of other religions, too. This lowest common denominator Jesus is reasonable place to be. It's kind of where the disciples were on Easter morning – remembering the teachings of a good man, an extraordinary prophet, a faithful rabbi.

The women certainly felt all those things about Jesus, but on Easter morning their experience led them to assert something more. Jesus is alive or at least it seemed that way after visiting the empty tomb and hearing from two messengers. Jesus is alive and the women wanted the rest of the disciples to believe it. But the disciples flatly reject their testimony. “It seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

And while I know that the disciples' level-headed rejection of the women's testimony is not that different from our level-headed rejection of many of the things the church has taught us about Jesus through the years, still, I find it depressing that before the church really even gets started it has already decided *what God can't do* in the world. Before the church has ever held its first committee meeting, its earliest members are already saying, “*that can't work.*” Before the church has ever preached its first sermon its first members are already saying, God is not *that* powerful. Before the church has ever held its post-crucifixion meal, it has already said, we can't feed *that many* people.

Those first disciples *disbelieve the power of their God to move in ways beyond their own understanding.* Those first disciples reject the possibility of God to transform their world in ways *beyond their own controlling.* Those first disciples *reject the possibility of God's ability to bring life where there is death.*

Which is a problem for the church, at least the one residing in Baltimore this year. If Jesus' own disciples can't entertain the possibility that God can bring life in the midst of death. . .If Jesus' own disciples' can't imagine God defeating old demons that divide us from each other. . .If Jesus' own disciples can't imagine a city's exile ending, a devastated city rebuilt, if Jesus' own disciples can't imagine God at work beyond our understanding, then what's the point of church?

Some people on the what's often called the “left” side of the church answered that question this way: the point of church is to debunk everything you ever learned on the “right” side of the church. You were taught the earth and its people were created in 7 days? Guess what? It took 4.5 billion. Deal with it. You were taught that God flooded the world and only Noah and his family survived. Guess what, it didn't happen. Deal with it. You were taught that Jesus was born from a virgin birth. Guess what? The author of the Gospel of Matthew, who probably wasn't the disciple named Matthew, translated the word virgin incorrectly. It actually means young woman. Deal with it.

Some people who grew up on the other side of the church found this kind of teaching liberating, at least at first. I don't have to check my intellect at the door! I don't have to stop thinking when I enter the doors of the church. I don't have to embrace one way of understanding truth when I'm outside the church and another way of understanding it when I'm inside. Some people who grew up on the right side of the church found this kind of thinking liberating. But it also came with a cost.

Anything that required the use of your imagination was automatically demoted or discarded, which is pretty much all of the *interesting* stuff in the Bible. I don't just mean whales that swallow people whole, or donkeys that talk, or chariots that fly. I mean like the Bible's claim that a nation's future depends more on how it cares for the most vulnerable among us than how many guns it has. *Now that requires the use of your imagination.* Or the Bible's claim that suffering love is more powerful than brute force – *that takes some serious imagination.* Or the Bible's assertion that there are some things worse than death. Try explaining that to a nation that spends more each year on medical care in the last two months of life than the entire budget of the Department of Homeland Security.¹

When the church on the left privileges certainty above all else, we start looking a lot like a mirror image of the church on the right: narrowing down the content of our faith to a certainty that faith never achieves, throwing out all parts of the story of our faith that don't square with our scientific rulebooks, erasing any part of our faith that doesn't fit in between safe, established lines. Nothing like an idle tale allowed up in here.

It's one of the worst things the church can do especially at a time when too many of us seem ready to accept that segregation isn't going to end, that peace between the nations doesn't have a chance, that black lives won't ever matter. No fantastic stories about God's extraordinary ability to rock our worlds allowed up in here.

Yet that's where we find ourselves in the church – afraid of pinning our hopes on the God of resurrection, reluctant to announce good news that never comes with certainty, reticent to risk our reputations and our futures on stories that cannot be verified. It's one of the worst things the church can do.

It would be like announcing to our children, from now on, starting in infancy, we're only going to read biology textbooks to you. No Grimm's fairy tales, no Ezra Jack Keats, no Dr. Seuss. No Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, no Harry Potter, no To Kill a Mockingbird. We don't want to poison you with idle tales. Just the facts. It's one of the worst things you can do to your children. I know. A teacher did that to one of our kids in the first grade. A whole week's lesson in dividing things into the clean categories of "real" and "not real." I retaliated by indoctrinating my children with

¹ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-cost-of-dying/>

Pink Floyd's Another Brick in the Wall album, Mary Poppins, Gil Scott-Heron, and Jesus. I encouraged her to fail the assignment.

Because God knows we need to be raising children who can imagine that they don't have to live in the segregated neighborhoods that we bequeath to them, they don't have to accept as reality the global politics of fear that we will leave with them, they don't have to accept the two Baltimores that continue to divide us all. God knows we want our children to be freed from fear, to live with their hearts wide open savoring every breath they are given and spending that breath on justice, on relationships, on liberation. No, if they can imagine a God who brings life where there is death, hope where there is despair, courage where there is fear, then we will have given them a faith worthy of those first female disciples.

Because it's the stuff that doesn't yet seem real where all the possibility resides. This is as true for science as it is for politics as it is for faith. It's the stuff we don't yet know that offers extraordinary possibilities, the things that haven't yet come into being, the transformations that we haven't yet experienced. That's what resurrection is. A possibility that nobody has fully seen. A hope that can't be verified. A belief that always carries with it some measure of doubt. The possibility that God is the decisive character in our lives even if she's shrouded in mystery. Even those women at the tomb, they don't actually see resurrection, they just get some stronger hints than most of us – an empty tomb, a linen cloth, two angels.

I heard a story about one of those disciples last week. An ex-offender – someone I know - who walked through the doors of Zion Baptist Church into Turnaround Tuesday a year ago. Turnaround Tuesday was started by pastors in east Baltimore who were tired of all the crime and drugs in their neighborhood. And they imagined together, "what if, instead of trying to arrest everyone selling drugs, we listened to them instead." What they heard were young people telling them, "pastor if I could find legitimate employment I'd be the first one off this corner. I'd even help clean it up." Over 100 folks, mostly ex-offenders, started praying and dreaming and training together every Tuesday morning.

Last week one of those returning citizens walked through the brand new factory of Blueprint Robotics, where he is likely to obtain his first legitimate employment, a living wage job. They walked through the plant and looked at all the new technology, heard from the factory owner, Jerry Smalley, a businessman who came to BUILD and said he had imagined his new factory run by people who wanted to rebuild their lives. He had imagined his factory demonstrating steps that other business owners could take to make two Baltimores into one. As the young man who entered Turnaround Tuesday more than a year walked out of the factory and into the sunlight he turned to another leader and said, "A year ago, I didn't really believe. I just had a small hope. But this is real. Now I know," he said, "the first day I walked into Turnaround Tuesday was my last day selling drugs."

That's what resurrection is. A possibility that hasn't been fully seen. A hope that has to be lived before it can be verified. A belief that always carries with it some measure of doubt. And the blessing and the curse of faith is that these hints are all God chooses to give disciples. These hints, this testimony to the power of our resurrecting God – that's all most of us get. No Damascus road blinding lights, no metaphysical appearances of the risen Christ, no supernatural signs. Just hints of resurrection given to a people living in a dangerous world of fear. Not certainty, not evidence, not safety. Not doctrines as substitutes for our own wrestling with the costs of discipleship, our own struggling through despair and doubt, but hints of resurrection.

I wish I could say we get more than hints in a city exactly 1 month away from being on edge again. I wish I could say we get more than hints when disease hits unexpectedly, or your job is taken, or children die while they're still young. I wish I could preach more than a hint with our racial wounds open and bleeding, our nation divided, and terrorists on the loose. I wish I could say we get more than hints.

But certainty is almost never what disciples are given. Just faith. Faith that God is still on the move righting wrongs. Faith that God is in the world announcing life in death. Faith that God is weaving relationships out of division. Faith that God is birthing community in the middle of fear. I wish I could give you certainty. I wish I could give you more than faith. All I can say is that it was enough for those first women to he tomb. Maybe it will be enough for you, too.