

“An Idle Tale for Prisoners and Others Desiring Freedom”

Luke 24:1-12

Rev. Andrew Connors

Easter Sunday

April 17, 2022

These words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them. Part of the reason they did not believe them is because they were women. Typical misogyny that we've had no shortage of seeing in the last several years, or ever. But I bet there's more than a few of us here this morning who don't believe the testimony of these first witnesses and not because they are women. We don't believe them because what they're claiming they saw doesn't happen outside of storybooks. An empty tomb? Men in dazzling clothes claiming a human being has risen from the grave?

I wish I could claim that, of course I believe them because that's what a Christian who tries to be feminist is supposed to do, but if someone claimed to see something similar today I know I'd be as skeptical as those first disciples. In fact, the only difference between me and those earlier disciples is that I'd be smart enough not to say too much about it. "That sounds quite interesting," I'd say truthfully even though I'd be thinking, "what new age, weirdo schemes have you been smoking?" I'd be just as skeptical. It's just that I wouldn't share that skepticism with the person giving that kind of testimony - the modern North American way of dealing with conflict.

Not telling that conservative Christian family member that you don't actually care about trying to win your agnostic neighbor over to the Christian column, *avoiding* that racist neighbor who lives down the street instead of challenging him, *keeping your beliefs to yourself* so you don't have to hear those of anyone else that agitate, challenge, or annoy. The early disciples were brutally honest and I don't mean honest from the safety of their social media platforms - I mean face to face. Brutally honest with their reactions. We've learned it's better to conceal our own.

The disciples didn't believe Jesus was risen from the dead even though he had told them this is what would happen, even though the women saw some compelling evidence to suggest it might just be true. Most of us don't believe it either, we just aren't willing to actually say so. We don't believe resurrections happen in real life. We don't believe miracles happen in real life. We don't believe a fantasy story is anything more than a fantasy story - something to help us escape from the world as we find it, to numb the pain of the predicaments that we face in our time.

—The predicament of a warming planet on track to catastrophe.

- The predicament of a politics dangerously close to even more violent confrontations. –The predicament of hamster-wheel living run by an economy that wants more and more to keep everything from toppling while giving less and less to most people.
- The predicament of a culture we worry may have run its course.

Maybe the resurrection story itself has run its course. That's what the atheist philosopher Martin Hägglund suggests in his book *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. At the center of the Christian faith, the Yale professor argues, is a kind of escapism that is incompatible with a full commitment to living *this* life. "Rather than celebrate Jesus' death as a pathway to heaven," he writes, "we should recognize that Jesus died, as every beloved has always died, with no afterlife apart from those who cared to remember him. To behold the death of Jesus in this way is to acknowledge that every life, even the life of the most beloved, ends in death. . . it is a loss," he writes, "that cannot be recuperated - since there is no life other than this life."¹

Hägglund's not concerned that his belief, or lack of it, might lead to hopelessness. On the contrary, "the peril of death is an intrinsic part of why it matters what we do and why it matters that we devote ourselves to someone or something living on beyond ourselves," he writes.² Another brutally honest disciple who doesn't believe in idle tales and is willing to say so.

If you follow Hägglund, then you come to the conclusion that religious faith really is the opiate of the people, leading people like you and me either to care less about this life, this planet, this body, this community than we do about some fantastical hereafter, or it leads us to deceive ourselves and others about the fact that our true commitments really are secular, not based on the God of our faith. A creation of our imaginations - an idle tale - that we don't need in order to live a good life or create a just society. All that's needed is a commitment to this life and the things that make it meaningful.

And I don't know why exactly, the writings of an avowed atheist seem so relevant to me this year, on Easter Sunday of all Sundays. Maybe because as Cornel West said most of the gods we worship are false gods and when someone loses faith in god, chances are it was probably a false god anyway.³ Or maybe because I have a strong hunch that Hägglund's kind of thoughtful deconstruction of all religious faith is only going to grow stronger in these challenging times and people of faith need to engage

¹ Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, (New York: Anchor Books), 2019, pp. 167-168.

² Ibid, p. 168.

³ Cornel West, speaking on a panel at Union Theological Seminary. No date given. Retrieved April 17, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWIsawVjvWI>.

these ideas instead of running from them. Or maybe because so much of what I hear from many of you is about your own secular commitments - desires to be a good and just person in a world that seems intent on beating it out of you.

But if I'm going to risk being as brutally honest as the disciples who first reject the testimony of those first witnesses to the empty tomb, I think it's because after all that we have seen and experienced in the last several years, how could any of us not question testimony of a resurrecting God? How do you reconcile the promise of new life with the deaths of nearly a million of our own citizens from Covid many of whom would rather die than trust basic science? How do you reconcile the promise of justice and generosity and peace when many of the very Christians who espouse those beliefs elected and still celebrate one of the most destructive, narcissistic men in the history of our republic? How do you reconcile the promise of resurrection while our city is still scarred by racial redlining, and 300+ murders a year? How can you believe in the promises of a God who brings a people out of oppression, while the rates of people shot and killed by police haven't changed at all in the last seven years, the planet is still warming way too fast, and the cooperative spirit that is necessary to address any these things drifts father out of our reach?⁴ And how can you believe the God who loves you is more than an idle tale while so many of you have carried so much seemingly on your own - relationships coming apart, your zest for life weakened, your purpose that seemed clear before months of quarantine now insecure or unresolved?

It's the disciples who doubt resurrection in the text - the people considered closest to Jesus. The ones who went through the trauma of watching their friend and teacher crucified. The ones who experienced a loss that they didn't understand. They don't want any idle tales to draw them out of their harsh realities. They don't want any idle tales to numb the pain of their loss. They don't want any idle tales that invite their participation in self-deception. They want to deal with reality before them. No escapist faith. They feel compelled to accept real life as it is.

For years I've been preaching that *this is what faith actually does* - it addresses real life and gives you courage to do so. It invites you to go deeper into life as you find it, not run away. But all those years I assumed that *belief* in resurrection here and now was necessary to achieve that kind of blessed hope. *Belief* in resurrection here and now was the prerequisite. You had to believe that the resurrection had happened and could happen in this life. *Belief* was the key that opened the door to a life without fear of death or of any of those forces that cause us to shrink from the risk of sharing the kind

⁴ On police shootings, see "Fatal Force," *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>, updated April 16, 2022.

of love, of announcing the kind of justice, and living the kind of freedom that got Jesus killed.

But I haven't seen any resurrections beyond the metaphorical kinds that Hägglund accurately describes as totally secular. Which I think is way more of a bummer than Hägglund concedes because if this life is all we've got, and each other is all we've got - no offense - then I don't see how we get out of the major messes that we are in. And I don't have Hägglund's confidence that the democratic socialist answer that he presents is going to change the problems that we face which are fundamentally about people - human beings - and our seeming inability to leave the planet and each other better off than when we found them.

Then I came across J.R.R. Tolkien's 1939 essay on Fairy Stories. "At no time can I remember that the enjoyment of a story was dependent on belief that such things could happen, or had happened, in 'real life.' Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened desire, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded."⁵

Not belief that such things could happen or had happened in "real life," but in the awakened desire that such stories bring. Tolkien had me wondering, what if believing the resurrection had happened in this life wasn't as important as desiring the world where it does happen. A world where pain doesn't last forever, where death dealing powers that put people on crosses don't have the final word. A world where loving with your heart on your sleeve isn't foolish but satisfies your heart and life. A world where justice for your neighbor doesn't come at your expense but with everyone's fulfillment. A world where God's love and grace can't be taken from you come hell or highwater but holds you through every trial.

It's not that belief isn't good or even preferable, it's just that maybe when you make belief the prerequisite, it shuts down desire, dictating what is and isn't possible. Instead of desire leading the way with its dreams, taking you on a journey, belief passes its verdict and shuts desire down.

The desire for a world where the resurrected life finds you at every turn. The desire for a world where tombs don't have the final word. The desire for a world where bread that's shared multiplies, and tyrants are overthrown, and the seeds of peace are being sown sometimes by your efforts and other times in spite of them, even when it seems as though the opposite is happening. The desire for a world where your final breath doesn't have to be "please don't let it end," but rather, "I wonder what is next."

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," originally given as a an oral address at the Andrew Lang lectures at St. Andrews in 1938, published in 1939. Retrieved online April 15, 2022, <https://coolcalvary.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/on-fairy-stories1.pdf>, p. 19.

And while that world might seem like an escape from this one, Tolkien says escape is sometimes the very thing that we need from so-called “real life.” “I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which ‘Escape’ is now so often used. . .Why should a [person] be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.”⁶

The women at the tomb - all they offer to those skeptical, brutally honest disciples is an invitation to look beyond our real life walls and see if there are alternatives beyond them. An invitation to dream about more than jailers or prison-walls. An invitation to enter a different story than the one we’ve accepted as “real life” - to try it on like a thrift store coat and see if the person we become - the people we become - are more desirable than the ones we’ve come to accept as the limit of what is possible. I desire that resurrected life world, don’t you?

Peter goes back to the tomb and I don’t think it’s because he suddenly believes the women. I think they planted a seed to grow alongside his discontent with the idea that “real life” is all that there is. He wanted to be amazed by more than what he had seen that terrible Friday on Calvary. He desired more to his own life than acceptance or belief could dish up. He wanted to escape from that stifling upper room where death kept him locked up inside his own fear. He wanted to taste a different world than the one he had seen where tyrants in power always win, rule-by-fear always wins, where acceptance of life as we find it is the only real possibility. He wanted to go outside the prison walls and see for himself whether that reality he had come to accept as “real life” was the only one.

Which is the real issue, whether you are an ivy league philosopher desperately trying to get people to see that we could all leave behind the small rooms to which we have confined ourselves for much larger, fuller life, or a disciple who has come to dismiss idle tales as dead ends instead of doors that lead us out of prisons of our own making. Are we open enough, are we hungry enough - are you hungry enough to run out of whatever familiar room you’ve been staying in to look in the places where you thought there was only death, with the desire to see something more?

I don’t know if that desire was ever satiated for Peter. Maybe this whole story is nothing more than a creation of the world’s best artists, an escapist tale to distract you from “real life” with all of its challenges. But I’ll tell you this - I’d trade 1000 lives of accepting the punch-clock reality as it’s been dictated to me, the narrowed expectations that life can be for me, for you, for everyone— I’d trade them all for one life lived as though love really was stronger than fear, life really was stronger than death, joy really was possible for every human being I know. To let this fairy story swing wide the prison

⁶ Ibid, pp. 29-30.

bars that I've closed in on myself or allowed the world to close in on me, to see how this idle tale might change me, and you, to change "real life" for everyone.