

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Utter Nonsense or Gospel Truth

Luke 24:1-12

As a preacher, I'm thankful when you the listeners give me indications that I'm on the right track with my sermon. For instance, if you're awake, that's a good sign. Or you're sitting up near the edge of your seat, leaning into what I'm saying. Or your facial expression reveals interest and engagement with the story I'm telling. Or you just come right out and verbalize your agreement with an "Amen!" or a "Praise the Lord!" These are some of the ways I'm able to tell that you're on board with what I'm preaching.

But what if your reaction to my sermon is skepticism or disagreement? What if you don't believe what I'm saying? What if you doubt the truthfulness of my message? What if, instead of responding with "Amen!," someone in the pews shouted, "Nonsense! Utter nonsense!"

That's what it was like for the women who came back from the cemetery on Easter morning and announced what they had seen and heard to the apostles. As others have noted, it was really the first Christian sermon, and it certainly didn't generate a positive, enthusiastic response. On the contrary, the apostles and those who were with them reacted with resistance and disbelief. The translations vary, but they all capture the same basic sense. The women's message seemed to them like "an idle tale," "empty talk," "a silly story," "a foolish yarn," "utter nonsense."

Note that in our text, the ones who reject the women's testimony aren't hard core atheists who are making speeches about how believers are clinging to escapist superstition, or writing books about how the world would be so much better off without religion. No, the initial resistance to the Easter news is coming from those who had been with him, the very ones who were his disciples. They're the first skeptics who will soon be brought into a realization that Jesus really has risen. So why do they initially doubt the women's report and dismiss their revolutionary announcement?

It could be partly because of the gender of the preachers. In that cultural and religious context, the testimony of women wasn't given the same weight as men's, either personally or in a court of law. And yet, Jesus himself, before he entered Jerusalem, had told his disciples that he would be killed and on the third day rise again. So it's not as if the women have created a fantastic story that's totally out of sync with what Jesus had already been teaching his followers. So there's more going on here than just the issue of the reliability of female messengers.

Maybe, as preacher Thomas Long has suggested, the good news of Jesus' resurrection was just too overwhelming for the disciples to believe. Long tells a story about a friend's son who was a great fan of Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. The boy watched both of their television shows faithfully. One day it was announced that Mister Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. Naturally, the boy was ecstatic. Both of his heroes, together on the same show! Every morning he would ask, "Is it today that Mister Rogers

will be on Captain Kangaroo?" Finally the great day arrived, and the whole family gathered around the television. There they were, Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo together. After watching for a minute, the boy, surprisingly, got up and left the room. Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, "What is it, son? Is anything wrong?" And the boy replied, "It's too good. It's just too good."¹

As Long says, maybe the disciples were slow to believe the news of Jesus' resurrection because it sounded too good to be true. It was just too much to take in, too much to assimilate all at once. So their first reaction was to play it safe and assume that nothing had really happened, and therefore that nothing had really changed in the world. And to be honest, wasn't that the outlook the women themselves had when they first journeyed to the tomb? They got up early on the assumption that the world goes on as usual. Evil and injustice keep marching on. Suffering and death continue. The flesh of the deceased Jesus is beginning to decay. Those spices the women were carrying tell us everything we need to know about what they were expecting to see when they reached the cemetery. As far as they could tell, it was business as usual in this lost and broken world.

That's when Easter turned scary, and the women ended up with faces bowed to the ground when heavenly messengers appeared to explain why Jesus' body was gone. In a short span of time, the women have moved from devotion to confusion to fear. That's part of what happens when you realize that God is on the move, and the dead don't stay dead.

Pastor John Ortberg tells about a friend named John who used to work as a denominational official. One of his jobs was to travel to small rural communities where they didn't have churches to do funerals. He would go out with an undertaker, and the two of them would ride together in the hearse. One time, when they were on their way back from a funeral, John was feeling tired and decided to take a nap. Creepy as it sounds, he thought that since they were in a hearse he would just lie down in the back. The guy who was driving the hearse pulled into a full service station to get some gas. Understandably, the attendant filling the tank was kind of freaked out, what with a body stretched out in the back. While he was filling the tank, John woke up, opened his eyes, knocked on the window, and waved at the attendant. He said he never saw anybody run so fast in his whole life.²

As Ortberg says: "When people see life where they were expecting death, they start running. On the third day, everything changed! Where everybody thought they were just going to see death, there was life! And that shook things up!"³

Maybe one of the reasons why those first disciples, and we ourselves, are resistant to the good news of the resurrection is because it scares us. It can be frightening to hear that the world, and our life in it, isn't the closed, mechanical, and rational system that we often think it is, that there isn't a natural explanation for everything. We get so accustomed to and comfortable with business as usual, going about our lives without a sense of God's life-giving power and God's commitment to remake the world into what he intends it to be, that we're rightfully unsettled to hear that God is on the move, that Jesus is alive, and that the world to come has broken into the world as it is. So if you're feeling settled, secure, and safe with the way things are in your life, the news that Jesus is risen can be deeply disturbing. It shakes things up. It's tempting to reject such an announcement as an idle tale, utter nonsense.

But notice that in Luke's story of the resurrection, there's more than just doubt, confusion, and fear. There's also a desire to search further, to dig deeper into the Easter announcement. It comes in the form of Peter, who decides to go to the tomb and check things out for himself. He looks in the tomb and confirms that the body is gone. This in

itself isn't enough to persuade him to believe, but it is enough to make him wonder, to keep him open to the possibility, overwhelming and frightening as it is, that Jesus has risen. Only as Luke goes on to tell about their personal encounters with the risen Lord do we see the disciples come to the fullness of faith.

Whether you're someone who professes faith in the risen Lord Jesus, or someone who's not sure whether the Easter message is utter nonsense or gospel truth, I hope you'll use this worship gathering as a God-given opportunity to go further into the message that was first received and preached by the women at the tomb: "He is not here; he has risen!" It may seem too good to be true. It may sound too frightening to bear. But if you're willing and open to look deeper into the significance of the resurrection for your life, and for the life of the world, I believe that the living Jesus, who is present here with us today, will come to you and show you more of who he is and who he intends you to be.

That's because belief in the resurrection is more than just something you agree with in your head and accept in your heart. It's also something that takes concrete shape in the way you live your life. Most of the time, the real test of whether you believe that the gospel is an idle tale or absolute truth takes place on the ground in the ordinary and sometimes extraordinary circumstances, details, and decisions of everyday life. In particular, the way that you respond to suffering, sorrow, and death itself.

Some of you may remember how pastor Rick Warren and his wife Kay went through a devastating loss about three years ago when their son Matthew took his own life after years of battling mental illness and depression. About a year after the tragedy, Rick said,

I've often been asked, "How have you made it? How have you kept going in your pain?" And I've often replied, "The answer is Easter."

You see, the death and the burial and the resurrection of Jesus happened over three days. Friday was the day of suffering and pain and agony. Saturday was the day of doubt and confusion and misery. But *Easter*—that Sunday—was the day of hope and joy and victory.

And here's the fact of life: you will face these three days over and over and over in your lifetime. And when you do, you'll find yourself asking—as I did—three fundamental questions. Number one, "What do I do in my days of pain?" Two, "How do I get through my days of doubt and confusion?" Three, "How do I get to the days of joy and victory?"

The answer is Easter. *The answer ... is Easter.*⁴

During the course of today's sermon, no one has stood up and said, "Nonsense. Utter Nonsense." But that doesn't mean that there aren't questions, doubts, fears, or skepticism you may sometimes experience about the truthfulness of the gospel, especially in the face of the brokenness and lostness in our lives and in the life of the world. And yet, the resurrection still shows us that God's will and ultimate purpose for us is forgiveness, healing, and life. And when you, by faith, live your life in keeping with the will and purpose of God revealed in Christ, you testify to the reality that Jesus lives and reigns. You proclaim that Easter is still the answer.

David H. C. Read was the longtime, beloved pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. In one of his sermons, Read told his congregation: "One of the reasons I believe in the Resurrection is that my mother told me. And to this day a strong element in my belief is the number and quality of the people who told me."⁵ I'm here today, standing before you as a believer in the resurrection, because others told me, with their lips and their

lives. And now I again tell you that the Easter news isn't an idle tale. It isn't utter nonsense. It's the gospel truth about God, about us, and about the world.

¹ Thomas G. Long, "Empty Tomb, Empty Talk," *The Christian Century* (April 4, 2001) 11.

² From Ortberg's sermon, "The Empty Tomb: How Will You Respond?" Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. Posted at the Preaching Today website. Accessed March 23, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/march/3031615.html>>.

³ Ortberg, "The Empty Tomb: How Will You Respond?"

⁴ From Lee Stroebel, *The Case for Hope* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015) 56-57.

⁵ Quoted in Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 306.