

The Believable “Nonsense” of Easter
Sermon on Luke 24:1-12 (4/4 & 4/5/15; Easter 1)
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“Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some other women were the ones who had gone to the tomb. When they returned, they told the eleven apostles and the others what had happened. The apostles thought it was all nonsense and they would not believe [the women].”

“The apostles thought it was all nonsense and they would not believe [the women].”

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Can you imagine having the story to tell that those women had to tell...and then no one believes you?

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Jesus had died and had been buried on Friday. The women had gone to his tomb early Sunday morning to prepare his body in the way that was their custom.

This was before funeral homes. At this time, among these people, those who were closest to someone honored them in death by anointing their body with appropriate ritual oils and spices.

I don't know if it was *supposed* to be women who did this, or if that's just the way it happened for Jesus. Regardless, it was Jesus' female followers – and not his male followers – who went to his tomb that first Easter morning.

Upon their arrival at the tomb, the women found the stone rolled away from the opening...and, when they went in to investigate, they saw that Jesus' body was not there.

In the midst of what must have been extreme confusion and fear, two men in shining white clothes appeared to them – angels, perhaps? “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” they asked.

“Jesus is not here; he has risen – just like he said he would.” Then the women remembered that Jesus had, in fact, told them that this was to happen – that he would be handed over to sinners, that he would die by crucifixion, and that, on the third day, he would rise from the dead.

Jesus had told them this would happen...but, for whatever reasons, they didn't believe him – perhaps they didn't *want* to believe him.

Because why would they *want* to believe that?

Why would they want to believe that a day would come when Jesus would no longer be with them? Why would they want to believe that their Lord would die an excruciatingly painful death?

Why would they want to believe *that* when what they wanted most was for Jesus to be with them always?

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In his time on earth, Jesus brought good news to the poor...he offered hope to prisoners and those held captive by demons...he brought sight to the blind and healing to countless others...he bound-up the broken-hearted...he fed the hungry, ate with sinners, and, with grace and power, he challenged people to turn away from sin and to turn toward God's incredible forgiveness.

For these reasons – and so many more – of *course* Jesus' followers did not want to believe he would die by crucifixion...of *course* they did not want to believe that.

And, you know, when we hear something we do not want to hear, it's amazing what we can miss while our ears are closed. "What's that, Jesus? You say the Messiah must suffer and die at the hands of sinners? No, no – I don't want to hear that!"

But the angels jogged the memories of the women. The angels reminded them what *else* Jesus had said when their ears were closed: "Why are you looking in the place of the dead for someone who is alive? Jesus isn't here! He has been raised from death."

The women suddenly remembered and they left the tomb to go tell the disciples – now *apostles* – their amazing story. What Jesus had said had *actually* come true!

"[But] the apostles thought it was all nonsense and they would not believe [the women]."

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I've read in multiple places that biblical translators have made this phrase a whole lot nicer than it actually is in the original Greek.

The Greek word "leros" is, here, translated into English as "nonsense." *"The apostles thought it was all leros – nonsense – and they would not believe [the women]."*

Preaching professor Anna Carter Florence says that, while "nonsense" is an okay translation of this Greek word "leros," it's best translated as "garbage, bull---" ... you fill in the blank. Apparently Luke used a word that is not "preacher-appropriate" to describe what the disciples *really* thought of the women's Resurrection story that first Easter morning.

“[But] the apostles thought it was all – leros – nonsense and they would not believe [the women].” They thought the women’s story was nonsense... garbage...bull---. And they would not believe them.

“What’s that you say? Jesus raised from the dead? No, no – I don’t think so.” I mean...it just doesn’t *work* that way. Right?

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Do you ever wonder when and why some of us start struggling to believe this story? Or when and why this story starts to lose its power? When I was a *child*, the truth of this story was something I simply took for granted:

“Of *course* the tomb was empty – why would Jesus be there when he’d been telling his followers he would rise from the dead? Of *course* there were angels waiting for the women to tell them about Jesus’ resurrection. Of *course* this is how it happened!”

But, at some point in growing-up, the reality of death became abundantly clear to me. And I don’t just mean physical, bodily death, though I do certainly mean *that*. At some point, of course, you figure out that, when someone dies, they are no longer physically present in this world.

In addition to that, though, as I grew-up, I became more and more aware of all the suffering and struggle in this world: all the suffering in families, in communities, among nations...all the abuse, the pain, the sickness, the addictions, the violence, the hunger, the divisiveness.

In a world with a 24-hour news cycle that is so often full of darkness and death – in all their various forms – why in the world *would* we believe that a man rose from the dead 2,000 years ago?

Why would we believe that when, so often, our world just doesn’t *look* like Resurrection is something worth believing?

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Now, “resurrection” is one of those words that’s just really not used in many non-church places. If you don’t learn the word “resurrection” here, it’s possible you will not learn it anywhere else.

But *learning* the word “resurrection” goes way beyond simply understanding its definition. It’s entirely possible to know in your head what “resurrection” means without fully understanding its scope...because a full understanding of “resurrection” comes from the very depths of the soul.

Yes, “resurrection” means the dead coming to life again. Easter *is* primarily about Jesus’ resurrection on the third day after his death.

A full understanding of Resurrection *also* means believing God can – and, indeed, God *will* – transform even the most hopeless of situations into something beautiful.

Fully understanding Resurrection means trusting there *will* be light at the end of every tunnel – even when that tunnel has completely surrounded you with darkness.

And fully understanding Resurrection means knowing that God is – and always will be – walking with you, whatever the road...whatever the circumstance...working for good.

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“[But] the apostles thought it was all – leros – nonsense and they would not believe [the women].”

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The apostles had not been at the tomb with the women. They had not seen the angels. They had not been reminded of Jesus' words about rising from the dead. Of *course* they did not believe the women. But they *needed* to believe the women's story.

And, even though we ourselves were not at the tomb that first Easter morning, we, too, *need* to believe the women's story. We need to trust it to be true. As *unbelievable* as it can seem.

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Now, of course, there are many, *many* who just cannot believe the Easter story to be true. And for a multitude of reasons.

When I say we *need* to believe this story, please understand I do not want to make light of those who doubt. I have been there myself and, in fact, I sometimes still find myself dwelling in doubt.

See, so often we need tangible proof in order to believe something unbelievable. The dead do not come back to life – they just don't. *That* is what we believe... *that* is what we know and trust. Yet.

Yet...here is this story...this *leros*...this “nonsense.” Here is this Easter story that, once again, we have come to this place this morning to hear and to celebrate as a story worth believing...and it's not just the *facts* of the story that are important:

Yes, we believe God raised Jesus from the dead and *that* is a fact vital to our Christian faith – despite its big, *unbelievable* nature. But, as big and unbelievable as *Resurrection* is, this Easter story is even bigger than the facts within it.

This Easter story is not only about God transforming Jesus' violent death into beautiful new life. This Easter story is about God transforming *everything* in this world: darkness into light...pain into joy...brokenness into forgiveness...division into unity...fear into love.

This Easter story is about all of those things...and more.

Because if God can transform the ugliest of deaths into the most beautiful new life, then *anything else is possible*. That is the hope of our Christian faith and life. That is Easter.

And what if, by God's mercy and grace, we allowed our selves and our lives to *look like* Easter? By God's mercy and grace, what if we allowed our ourselves to welcome light, joy, forgiveness, unity and love into our lives?

Perhaps if we allowed ourselves and our lives to look like all of those things – light, joy, forgiveness, unity, love – perhaps if we allowed our lives to look like those things, the Easter story would *not* seem like *leros*...it would not seem like nonsense – but, rather, would seem utterly and completely believable.

Seeing really is believing most of the time...and when the world sees light, joy, forgiveness, unity, and love from *us*, the world will believe.

Our *world* needs the Easter story to be true – so we *need* to believe it. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must *look* like Easter people...we must look like a people of *hope*...people who imagine life differently – because we are people defined by a story that is *unbelievable*.

May God help us in our unbelief. And may God bless us to live as Easter people – this day and always. Amen.

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One of the gifts of this particular Easter is that it happens to fall on the first weekend of the month, which is the weekend each month when we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion here at McCabe United Methodist Church.

Holy Communion is, for us, a tangible sign of Christ's continued presence among us – it is a powerful reminder of how Easter is *true*, even now. So let us turn to this holy meal as we continue to celebrate this most glorious, festival day...