



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson  
Sermon for Easter Sunday  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
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“ . . . returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven apostles and to all the rest. . . . But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

An idle tale.

A frivolous, meaningless, senseless story.

I realize that no man in the congregation has ever dismissed a woman like the apostles do in our gospel. Or at least if you have, you've probably only done it once!

We're not sure what gets into the apostles here, because these women have journeyed with them along the road that has taken them all to the cross. The apostles know these women. They know that they're to be trusted. Maybe the apostles are simply not being faithful to what they know. We all realize how easy it is to be distracted from what we know is the faithful way of life, especially when our minds are elsewhere, when we are distracted to begin with. And no doubt the apostles are distracted. They're grieving the death of Jesus: not only *that* he died but *how* he died. Talk about senseless! Their entire reality at the moment doesn't make sense!

Have you ever found yourself in that kind of place? Adjusting to some event – a divorce perhaps, an unexpected diagnosis, a death – whether expected or not; something that upends the world as you know it? Even positive events can have disrupting effects that we have to adjust to: marriage, the birth of children – talk about adjustment! A healing of that unexpected disease. In some ways those events – good or bad -- can grant us clearer perspective; and some ways we find ourselves in a space where we just could not live day to day.

The crucifixion has put the apostles into one of those times when the foundations are shaken. What they thought about Jesus -- what they thought about their God -- it's all up for grabs. So when these women return from the tomb, sputtering this unexpected story, we can understand why the apostles don't receive it as well as they might.

I know first hand how easy it is in the throes of grief to say something that you don't really mean or to act in a way that you would not act any other time. I still recall an interchange I had with one of my sisters-in-law the day after Carol's mother died over seventeen years ago. I don't know if my sister-in-law remembers it -- and thank God no one wrote it down for some preacher to talk about two millennia from now! But I do wish that it had never happened.

And unlike these women, the apostles have not had the shock of encountering either the empty tomb or the angels in order to disrupt their grief, to push them out of that space they're trapped in, a kind of tomb of their own.

We all know how it can take some shock to move us out of some psychic place in which we're living, in which perhaps a part of us is dying. Sometimes it's a joke, someone who makes us laugh. Sometimes it's encountering a worse situation than our own. Not seeing what we expect to see -- like a dead body -- that could do it, too. Or encountering something we don't expect -- like angels -- that could also do it!

I wonder: what would it take for God to get your attention in such a situation? And what does it take for God to get your attention on a day to day basis? To shake *you* up enough to see things differently -- or maybe to see things as they always are, but that you're too distracted to see?

It's easy for us to think of resurrection as the *exception* rather than as the *rule*. Then when we encounter it as these women do in the gospel, it's bound to be shocking. We might even reject it out of hand, as the apostles do: an idle tale. But what if we think of resurrection as the rule rather than the exception?

If you read the article about Easter in Saturday's Journal Star, you know that one of the pastors talked about how resurrection stories among the gods of Jesus' time were nothing unusual, that Jesus was no great exception when it came to such a story. Could it be that there's a deep seated truth in that reality, that the peoples of the earth were tapping into a truth that we Christians also share in and proclaim in the story of Jesus?

And if resurrection – God asserting the predominance of life over death in *all* things – if resurrection is not the exception but the rule, then how does that shift *our* perspective? What becomes shocking to us then? I suppose the great temptation would be to take death *less* seriously. If God is going to assert life, then why worry about it? But resurrection does not deny death. In fact, as a former bishop of mine used to say, resurrection only works on dead things. Does that mean that we seek death so that resurrection can take place? No more than we seek sin so that we might know grace.

The Biblical wisdom is that as Christians who take both death *and* resurrection seriously, as people who are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, *we* work with God *for* the life that *God* grants to all, all the time, even in the face of death. Death and the forces of death are no less shocking to us. Resurrection doesn't do away with grief; but it does add a little different shade to it. It's grief with hope, grief with trust – trust that God is working to overcome death in all its manifestations. And what God wants, what God *promises*, God eventually gets.

If we are looking for resurrection, if we're expecting it, we find it in more places; we find God's work – sometimes dramatic and sometimes subtle – in places where otherwise we would miss it. And even when we have trouble seeing it, we trust that God is there working nonetheless. We become less cynical and more trusting, both of one another, and of God.

Maybe the apostles would not have chuckled and shaken their heads at this tale they hear from these women, maybe instead *all* of them would have run to the tomb as Peter does, in order to see together that the promise Jesus had made to them had been fulfilled.

Seeing resurrection life as the very basis of reality and not the exception affects us in other ways, too. We become quicker to forgive, less apt to hold onto the nails we have endured in life. We become less judgmental; our hearts are quicker to empathize. And we are more compassionate toward those who suffer because they've made poor choices along the way, including ourselves.

When we trust in resurrection life, the world becomes a different place: a place where power is used to serve, not to dominate. And we *have* to seek ways to help those who do *not* have, to make sure that they have food and shelter and health care, and *hope* wrapped up with it all. Rather than bombs, *life* ends up exploding all over the place – bursting out like flowers budding at the end of winter.

Easter faith says that God is already working in all these ways, and that when we claim that faith for ourselves, we start acting in God's way, too.

The Biblical scholar Raymond Brown comments that although these women could see with their eyes that Jesus' body was gone from the tomb that Easter morning, it was only through faith that they could accept that his body was gone because God had raised Jesus from the dead.

We are not likely to see resurrection reality with our eyes only. But trusting in God's passionate will to bring life where there is death, and having faith that God's power to bring about resurrection is at work, we do see the world quite differently. What at one time we might have considered idle tales become the way things truly are.

The world changes.

And so do we.