

**An Idle Tale It Seemed to Them  
(And So They Did Not Believe)  
Easter, April 4, 2010  
Larry and Sandy Reimer  
The United Church of Gainesville**

**Luke 23:55-56; 24:1-11**

**Sandy:** The women who had come with Joseph of Arimathea from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

But on very early on Sunday morning, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went into it, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

**Larry:** The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinful people, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

**Sandy:** Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other with them who told this to the disciples.

**Larry:** But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

**Larry:** Here's a statement you can ponder some morning at 4:00 a.m. if you want to get your mind off worrying about whether you will ever get into the college everyone expects you to go to, or if it's time to put new tires on the car, or if you'll have enough money for retirement, or if... if... if... It's a quote by Carl Sagan, "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence."

**Sandy:** Think about that statement. "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence." If you flip a coin five times and it always comes up heads, you do not have evidence that there is a "tails" side to that coin. But the absence is not evidence that there is no "tails" side of that coin.

For Carl Sagan the absence of evidence that there was another planet similar to the planet earth was not evidence of the absence of such a planet.

In other words, one should not be too quick to declare a general truth from a limited experience. However, taking this theorem too far also has its problems.

For example, Donald Rumsfeld used the statement "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence" to justify the Iraq war when, in fact, no weapons of mass destruction turned up there.

**Larry:** You may choose to spend the rest of this Easter sermon pondering this absence of evidence theorem, or you may move back with us temporarily to Luke's story of the empty tomb. We will get back to the "absence of evidence" debate later.

We've enjoyed a lot of good bible study this Lenten season as we've sought to put flesh on the bones of faith. Remember that in the four New Testament gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - there are four different accounts of the resurrection, all of them beginning rather similarly with the empty tomb, but each one adding its own unique details.

The gospels were all written no earlier than the year 70 of the Common Era, at least 37 years after the death of Jesus. None of the gospels was written by an eyewitness. No one was walking around recording the events of the life of neither Jesus nor his sayings, as spiral notebooks and ballpoint pens had not yet been invented.

**Sandy:** Yet stories were told and remembered, fragments were written into manuscripts, and finally, whole gospels were created. Of the many source materials of Jesus' life and teachings, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were certified by the early church as the most consistent and accurate portrayals of the life of Jesus.

**Larry:** Today, we read the Easter story as it is told in the gospel of Luke, the only gospel that records the names of these three women who go to the tomb: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. Identifying Mary as the mother of James has caused all kinds of problems for traditional biblical scholars. James is named as Jesus' brother in Mark (6:3) and Matthew (13:55), which would make Mary the mother of James also the mother of Jesus. This does not work if the church needs Mary to have remained a virgin her whole life, so the Catholic Church has twisted itself into a pretzel defining this Mary as someone other than the mother of Jesus. I think it is eminently reasonable to assume that this Mary, the mother of James, is Jesus' mother.

**Sandy:** Mary Magdalene is identified by many traditions as someone very close to Jesus, perhaps the woman who anointed his feet with precious ointment at the home of Simon the Leper.

The third woman, Joanna is mentioned earlier only in Luke, (8:3), as one who provided for Jesus from her own money. She is considered to be a disciple.

Joanna and other women's names were probably expunged from the list of the disciples by the patriarchy of the early church. However, Luke manages to slip these names into his writing, women whose names would otherwise have been lost.

All the gospels say that it was women who went first to the tomb. This has a strong ring of truth to it because there would be no reason to make it up. In fact, if the women's appearance at the tomb was not such a solid tradition, the early church fathers would have ignored it, not only because of their bias against women, but also because women did not have a voice in a court of law, so their testimony could not be admitted into evidence. If you were going to make up witnesses to testify to the resurrection, you certainly wouldn't use women's names.

So the empty tomb's first witnesses were women. And just as we're about to shout "Hallelujah" that the voices of these women are affirmed in the earliest gospels of the church, look at what happens next. The women immediately go and tell the men, the disciples, their story.

**Larry:** "But these words seem to the disciples an idle tale," says Luke, "and they did not believe the women."

You can all give your pirate scream of frustration right now, "AAAARGH!"

To the men, there is still an absence of evidence that Jesus has risen. It's just somebody else's story, a story told by women. Yet, as narrow minded and insensitive as these men were, they also do represent an important reality. Resurrection is not something anyone can or should believe in based on someone else's story. Resurrection is something that each of us is called to experience in our own lives.

**Sandy:** Remember that example I gave of the absence of evidence? If you flip a coin five times and it comes up heads each time, you may have the absence of the evidence of tails on the coin, but it is not evidence that tails are absent from coins.

The disciples heard the women's stories and didn't believe them, thought instead that there was an absence of credibility, of evidence in their account. The disciples had to flip the coin of resurrection a few more times and experience it landing tails up themselves to find their own faith.

The same is true for all of us. We can read all the stories we want of empty tombs and resurrection, but until you and I experience these resurrections in our own lives, it's just an idle tale, no matter who tells it.

Something clearly happened to those women on that Sunday morning at the tomb. Nothing yet had happened to the men. It would happen to them, not in doctrine, but in experience. And it happened to Jesus' followers in the 37 years between his death and the writing of Luke's gospel. During those years, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, tore down the temple, and killed thousands of Jews. Yet somehow, those believers, who were called followers of "The Way",

kept Jesus' message and memory alive. They experienced Jesus as risen, alive in their lives and found the hope of resurrection against all odds.

I have always loved the words of Albert Schweitzer, who reminds us that we each learn, for ourselves, in our own experience who Jesus is. The same is true for resurrection. Faith, after all, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.

**Larry:** My father died when he was 62. I was 34. He was a great dad and wonderful grandfather, and I missed him so much. The first Christmas after his death, I was a mess. I couldn't make decisions on gifts. I was unsettled in my faith. Finally, I took time for my own guided meditation to connect with my dad. I visualized him before me, and to my everlasting surprise he said to me, "I forgive you." "Forgive me?" I thought, "What did I do?" As great a dad as he was, I thought he would ask my forgiveness for the gaps in his relationship with me. The fact that he opened with "I forgive you" convinced me that my image of him was not just my own projection. I would have never placed those words in his mouth. My tears were not only in recognition of what I needed to be forgiven for, not only in gratefulness for his forgiveness, but also that this was my resurrection experience. I could return to my dad and he to me again and again.

**Sandy -** I believe we find resurrection, just as the disciples, just as the faithful have over the ages, in many ways: in visions, in dreams, in memories, in nature, in unexpected second chances, in unearned unexplainable moments of grace, and in moments where someone we loved who has died is suddenly as close as our heartbeat.

Think of those times of resurrection in your own life. Think of times when your innocence, your faith, was stripped down to the bone. Think of the wounds that left you shattered. Think of times when you knew your life would never be the same. And then think of the ways you have risen again, the ways your life has come back to you, the times you have experienced that life after a death is not an idle tale.

To push this another step, I believe with the conviction of faith that I am much more than my body, much more than the me you see standing here at this moment. As I age, my body is facing ever-increasing limitations, yet my soul and my spiritual self continue to grow and expand. And I believe, with faith that comes from the assurance of things hoped for, that my essence, my spirit, my soul will endure, will survive, long after my physical body is gone. And that too is for me the good news of Easter.

**Larry -** In those thirty seven years between the time of Jesus' death and Luke's writing, the disciples discovered together that all that Jesus stood for had not died, that his spirit was with them in the truths he shared.

I believe that as we endure both the triumphs and the tragedies of this life, we also find resurrection in living and believing the good news of those simplest of truths that Jesus shared, truths which could not be crucified with him on that cross, truths that live on within us and call us to resurrection again and again in this life and in the next. Hear them in the words of the Kathleen Norris.

**Sandy:** Look at the birds  
Consider the lilies  
Drink ye all of it

**Larry:** Ask  
Seek  
Knock  
Enter by the narrow gate

**Sandy:** Do not be anxious  
Judge not  
Go: be it done for you

**Larry:** Do not be afraid,  
Woman, arise  
Man, I say, arise

**Sandy:** Stretch out your hand  
Stand up  
Be still  
Rise

**Larry:** Let us be going  
Love  
Forgive

**Sandy:** Remember me. (*Kathleen Norris, "Imperatives" from Little Girls in Church, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995*)