

## **“Beyond an Idle Tale, Within the Shadow of a Doubt”**

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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*Luke 24:1-12*

Each of the four Gospels begins its account of the first Easter morning with at least one heartbroken woman coming to the tomb to pay her last respects to Jesus. In John, Mary Magdalene comes alone. In Matthew, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come together. In Mark Mary Magdalene brings two other women and some spices to boot, and in today’s text from Luke she brings spices and at least four other women with her—Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the *other women with them*. The four Gospel writers all take pains to say that it’s the women who come to the tomb, and they indicate that the women don’t expect to find an empty tomb. But—and this is the word that only Luke starts his account with, *but*—they come anyway.

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, 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 in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 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 sinners, 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. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*

I think the Gospel of Luke’s account of the first Easter was written for mainline churches just like Immanuel. You know, congregations filled with people who pride ourselves on not checking our brains at the door, led by seminary trained pastors who want to deliver intellectually stimulating sermons: messages that give us something to think about, that speak to the head and not just the heart. I always love it when people file out of church on a Sunday morning and they say, “You really gave us something to think about.” That’s music to a Presbyterian pastor’s ears.

Luke, supposedly a physician--and of all the Gospel writers the most learned and most committed to providing a detailed account--understands people like us.

In a culture like ours, so imbued and enamored with the Enlightenment notion of objectivity, even those among us who have the strongest faith and the largest capacity for taking things on trust can at least occasionally feel a pang of doubt, or long for some sort of verifiable proof of what we hold to be true.

That’s why Luke’s account gives us the apostles’ response to the women after they return from the tomb. When the women come back with their incredible story of the tomb being empty and finding two angels there who reminded them of what Jesus had said about rising from the dead, Luke records the apostles’ reaction succinctly: *But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*

Before we move to cutting the apostles a little slack, we have to acknowledge that they did have the eyewitness account of at least **four women**, women who were almost certainly known to them, and likely part of their larger circle. You might hope that would have been enough. But plenty of Biblical scholars suggest that the reason the apostles dismissed the women's account was precisely because they were *women*. As the spouse of a female Presbyterian minister and the colleague of two more on this staff and the father of two daughters, that irks me.

It makes me smile to know that the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote that *according to the Bible, were it not for women preachers, we'd have no knowledge of the resurrection.*

That said, would it really have been that much easier for the apostles to believe a man's report of such things, if they'd heard the news first from a man? After all, in Luke's own gospel, a couple of Jesus' followers are walking with the risen Christ himself later that day and telling him the sad story of his death. They go on to give the women's report and say that that some of their number went to check out the women's story and found the tomb empty but did not see him. Even though these two are walking and talking with the risen Lord, presumably appearing to them as a man, these travelers on the road to Emmaus don't believe what they've heard or what Jesus is telling them, *nor do they as much as recognize him* until after he breaks the bread.

To be fair to the apostles, if there is anything that would be unbelievable, it would be that a man that you watched die a horrible death and knew had been put in a tomb, would somehow be alive again. *Even if he told you he would rise from death.*

That, to put it mildly, runs counter to the dictates of science and would run counter to the reasonable expectations of human beings, even 1<sup>st</sup> century human beings. To bring that point home, consider how you would react if I walked up here told you that someone you knew without a doubt was dead—and maybe you'd even seen them die--was now back among us. My guess is that you would be more than a little skeptical. You'd probably be looking for some objectively verifiable proof of something so improbable.

Speaking of the improbable, it would be improbable indeed if there weren't at least a few among us this morning who feel the same way about the story of Jesus' resurrection, or the claim that lies behind that story that God's love is stronger than death, or who even question the existence of God. I imagine there might be somebody out there thinking to themselves, "I'm just here for the music and the baked ham later. I don't care **who** stands up there talking about resurrection or faith in a God who actually works in people's lives, as far as I'm concerned, it's all an idle tale. I'm not going to believe it until someone proves it to me beyond the shadow of a doubt"

As far as proving the resurrection is concerned, do you want the bad news or the good news first?

The bad news is that The Resurrection, and the truth behind Resurrection faith, which is trust in a living God of Love who won't let death get the last word, is not something that even the most ardent and articulate preachers can ever prove beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Moreover, many of the most faithful people that I know at least occasionally find themselves in doubt's shadow.

There is plenty of shadow to go around. Turn on the news. Click on your social media feed. Read the weekly prayer list, for God's sake. You'll find evidence of the power and pervasiveness of death, disease, destruction, disappointment, and division. People die, and face illness and decline. Our

fervent prayers are not always answered in the affirmative. Cultural and religious icons like Notre Dame catch fire, African-American churches are torched, violence is committed in the name of religion against Christians, and Jews, and Muslims, and people of other faiths and people of none. The fact that violence is sometimes committed against Christians jits home this morning when I heard, as perhaps you have, that churches were bombed during Easter services in Sri Lanka. It hits a little closer to home still for me because a member of Judith's church in Arlington is actually serving as a pastor in a church in Sri Lanka, right in Colombo, where the attacks were. The last we heard, the church he serves was not attacked and he is okay.

There's plenty of shadow to go around, because human beings have always been subject to the human condition, They've always had the capacity to exhibit terrible inhumanity and absolutely jaw-dropping hypocrisy.

That's the bad news, which means that resurrection can't ever be proved **beyond the shadow of a doubt**. Therefore it may always seem like just an idle tale to some people.

So are you finally ready for the good news, this Easter?

It's the news that the apostles' eventually discovered—not just when they checked out the women's words themselves, but more than that, when they continued the work Jesus started after he left them again and ascended into heaven.

The good news is that the Resurrection, and the truth behind resurrection faith (that God's love is stronger than death), while it is not something that can be proven **beyond the shadow** of a doubt **is** something that can be lived and trusted **within** the shadow of a doubt. Or the shadow of death. Or the shadow of a cross.

You see, Resurrection faith is not an activity of the mind. It's not assent to an intellectual proposition. It's not something we can *wrap our heads around*. It is instead **a movement of the heart and soul**. It's a way *of living in the world*, **a world that has always had its share of shadows**.

The other day a friend reminded me that what creates a shadow is the way even a little bit of light shines on or behind something. You don't have shadows in total darkness. The existence of a shadow means that there's light somewhere. That's the way it is with shadows.

Not unrelated to that, former President Jimmy Carter said once that the things you can't see are as important as those you can. They are ideals like justice, truth, humility, service, compassion, and love. You can't see any of those things, he says, but they can become the guiding lights of a life.

I would add that you can't prove them scientifically, either, but you can trust in their value and let them shine through and shape the way you live in the world despite doubts. I feel the same way about the claim of resurrection faith, that God's love is stronger than death, disaster, disappointment, and division.

It is my privilege as a pastor to see people living out resurrection faith all of the time. As often as not, they do it within the shadow of doubt, death, and disappointment. The shadows don't eliminate the light. They point to its existence.

I've watched addicts with one day clean and sober, who look at the woman with thirty years and have a hard time believing that the possibility of staying on the beam like that is anything but an idle tale. But one day at a time, with God's help, they do it. And then five, ten, fifteen, twenty years later, they find they've got some time under their belts, too.

I've beheld men and women, in this congregation and others, at the bedside of their dying spouse or child, saying goodbye, not knowing how they can possibly step into the next day or move through their grief, yet somehow they cling to the words of Psalm 23: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you ARE with me..*

I've witnessed church members and friends dropping everything, everything, to go and just be present with a dear one who has just received devastating news. In doing so, they embody with their very presence the truth that the God of love walks with us in the midst of life's darkest shadows.

I've seen people give significant chunks of their time and energy and their financial resources to the work of helping the poor and addressing injustice even though the challenges seem insurmountable.

I've watched people stick to the high ground, and practice forgiveness, and not return evil for evil even when they were sorely tempted to do so. I've seen people who do the hard work, the really hard work, of honestly trying to listen to and understand another person with whom they disagree.

All of these examples I've mentioned are signs of people who live as if there is something more powerful at work in the world than death, and division, and doubt, and disappointment. And because they do, they participate in something stronger than shadows.

A week and a half ago, I was walking from this sanctuary over to my office after a 12 step meeting. It was about 8:30 in the evening. I'd just gotten done telling a friend about how tired I was, how concerned I was for one of my loved ones, and I was going up the walk when I noticed something on the sidewalk. It was the shadow of a cross.

I posted it to my social media page and I sent it to the Tuesday morning Men's Bible study group—because the reading for the day in the Madeline L'Engle book had to do with the cross. Here's a response I received from one of our Immanuel members:

*Wow, incredibly moving image. Not symmetrical but orthogonal, crossing boundaries and extending beyond the visible (I.e., the walkway) just enough to know its presence is in the darkness as well, limitless ... the dark cross reminds me of the darkness of what we all can and sometimes often experience and of Good Friday, yet with a promise of the Lord's help in dealing with our darker moments, and of our ultimate resurrection...*

Behind the cross, behind the death and disappointment and even the doubt there is the light. It's the resurrection light. It's the resurrection hope. It's what we cling to.

That's not just an idle tale. It's the living story of a living God who will not let death get the last word. In Jesus' name. Amen.