A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

*Who is Easter for?*

Luke 24:1-12

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave. As the scriptures teach us, as we confess with the ancient creeds, as we believe with Christians everywhere in every generation, as we witness in the lowering and raising of baptism, Jesus Christ was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day, he rose again. Thanks to be God.

What a matter of faith is for us was a shocking proposition for them. The disciples were together somewhere early on the 1st day of the week, when a group of women burst in out of their minds with a story of what was going on out at the tomb where Jesus had been laid on Friday evening, just before sunset.

A large stone had been rolled in front of the opening of the tomb. But now, the stone is rolled away. The body of Jesus is not there. In the place of what should have been soldiers guarding the tomb, two men in dazzling white, they must be angels, right, were there as if they were waiting for the women. “We were terrified,” they said to the disciples, “but the angels said, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen.’”

It must have been the most coveted line to deliver in all angelic history. I bet the angels had a contest to figure out who would get to deliver the news. I can imagine them auditioning for it, practicing it, delighting in imagining what it was going to be like to deliver this line to bewildered tomb-visitors early in the morning.

A few years ago, we lined the kids up for an Easter photo. Pastel-clad kids in front. Parents in back. On the count of three, everybody smile. Except all the parents had planned that on the count of 2, we would crack confetti eggs on the heads of our beloved children. Everyone smile! 3… 2… crack. Oh, it was fun. We’re good parents. Anticipating how fun it would be was just about as much fun as actually doing it. Maybe the angelic anticipation was of the same order.

Maybe the line was impromptu, the angel-messenger in a moment of inspiration, going off script to deliver exactly the perfect line delivered at the perfect moment in just the right way. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” What a line.

The human women could hardly believe what their eyes and ears were telling them. The disciple men, back together in Jerusalem, were incredulous. “These words seemed to them an idle tale.” The most perfect line ever spoken, delivered in just the best way, after only one sharing, landed with a thud. Every preacher since then has known the feeling.

An idle tale: for all incredible news shared throughout the scriptures to people who were skeptical of what they were hearing, this is the only time in all of scripture that something is so resoundingly dismissed, called *an idle tale*, *Leros* in Greek. Nonsense, foolishness, twaddle. This news, the tomb is empty; he is risen was received as an absurd story.

Why? Why did the disciples dismiss the first Easter message with a wave of the hand and an eye roll? Was it poorly received because the first preachers of the gospel were women? It’s possible that had something to do with it. In a male-dominated society, women’s voices were considered by men to be unreliable, if they weren’t silenced all together. That’s one of the things that makes Jesus’ interactions so remarkable. Luke’s gospel in particular highlights the revolutionary role of women’s voices and actions in the ministry of Jesus. The gender of the speakers may have something to do with it, but that’s not the whole story. Likely, I think, it wouldn’t have mattered who came racing in with this news. It was too good to be true. Why are you telling stories about the living when you’ve just come from the place of the dead? If it’s not true, it’s foolish talk. If it’s true, well, that’s too good to be true.

What do we do when we hear news that’s too good to be true? The preacher Tom Long shares a story from his friend whose young son was enamored with Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers, two beloved tv personalities from his and my childhood. The boy faithfully watched both tv shows. One day, it was announced that Mr. Rogers would be paying a visit to Captain Kangaroo. The boy was ecstatic. Every day he would ask, “Is today the day Mr. Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?” Finally, the day arrived and the whole family gathered around the tv to watch. “There they were, Mr. Rogers and Captain Kangaroo together. The boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly got up and wandered out of the room. Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, ‘What is it, son? Is anything wrong?’ ‘It’s too good,’ the boy replied, ‘It’s just too good.’” (Tom Long, “Empty Tomb, Empty Talk, *Christian Century*, Apr 4, 2001.)

Goodness is at the heart of God’s story. God creates light and darkness, day and night, sea and dry land and sees that it is good. God creates the fish, the birds, all the animals. And sees it is good.

God creates people, two of them and all of them: men and women, boys and girls, big ones, little ones, tall ones, short ones, fat ones, skinny ones, blond hair and brown, black skin and white. God creates people and looks at those people amidst all the animals, and the fish, the waterfalls and trees, and behold, all of it was very good.

It’s not too good. It’s very good. The story of creation is that this world is very good. The story of the resurrection is that God is very good. This story isn’t about us and our feelings and whether we believe easily or are more skeptical. This isn’t a story about how much we want it to seem like Jesus would never leave us. This is a story about God’s power, God’s goodness, God’s delight in recreating the world in Christ. God is very good.

The best parts of Easter are the lovely celebrations: the confetti eggs cracked over unsuspecting children’s heads, Easter dinner and coconut cakes, and especially children dressed like they’d just sprung up and been plucked that morning out of the garden of cute children.

In countless ways, Easter is very good. The more you are shaped by the rhythms of church life the more you feel it: from Friday to Sunday, the convergence of goodness on Easter morning as it bursts from its Lenten cocoon, from the Invitation to All, to the flower cross and the baptism, black to white, light in the darkness, and singing the Lord’s Prayer together on Easter morning as we’ve done for years, placing our hearts and our voices in the hands of Kurt--and now Kathy. And baptism, the highlight of it all giving witness to saving faith in God in Christ. It’s all so very good.

Let us never forget. Let us never mis-tell ourselves the story. It’s not too good. If something is too good, it might seem like it’s for someone else—for those other people, for those other families, for those other lives, but not for me. And so, when we think it’s too good, we watch at a distance, as if we don’t belong. As if this is for someone else, like a child who can’t swim watching everyone else playing in the surf. Like a person who can’t believe watching enviously as others profess faith in the elusive mystery. Or like a person who feels like goodness is a test they have failed; a path they have left and now there’s no way back.

Whoever you are, Easter is not too good for someone like you. You know what Easter is for? It’s for all things that are broken, things that are not the way they’re supposed to be. It’s for all the things that are far from being too good: for families torn apart, for broken hearts and for hearts of stone, for sinners, and for a world in need of renewal, for martyrs who give their life for the faith. Easter is for the dead and the dying. Easter is for darkness and hopelessness wherever it is found. Easter is for those who are lost and those who are in pain. It is for life that remains entombed until the stone is rolled away.

Easter is for all people who believe they are not good at all, that they may be beyond redemption and hope. It’s for everyone who has concluded they must be unlovable. That’s who this day is for. Easter is not about whether we are good; God is good. God is grace.

Easter says, “God’s steadfast love endures forever.” God’s steadfast love overcomes all things. God is very good. And because God is very good, there is not place that is barren, no sin that is unforgivable, no broken heart that is un-mendable; no future that is hopeless; no darkness that cannot be illuminated; no death that cannot be overcome, no one who cannot be redeemed.

That’s what Easter is for. That’s *who* Easter is for. For you.

Why do we look for the living among the dead? We were asked. It took us a while to get over the stupefied amazement of that early morning, but we eventually find our words:

Well, we respond to the angel, who as an angel and not a human person, like us, doesn’t know anything about the joy of salvation: Mr. Angel, why do we look for the living among the dead? Because down here that’s where life comes from. We know now to always look for life among death because in God, death is overcome. So when we’re looking for what is true, what is beautiful, anything that is good, even what is very good, what seems too good to be true but it just simply *true*, we know now to look in the darkness for the light; we look in the place of death for new life; we turn our eyes to Christ Jesus who was crucified, died, and was buried. And on the third day rose from the grave.

We are buried with him in baptism, lowered into his death, and then we rise. We rise to walk in new life as new creatures in a new creation. We look for the living among the dead because what was dormant, dying, or already dead within us is made alive in him. In Christ, we are being redeemed. That’s the good news. Thanks be to God!

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