

***“Easter in the Present Tense”***  
***Luke 24:1-12***  
***Sermon, 4/21/2019***

Shortly after getting married, Barbara and I took a ride to Brooklyn, where I grew up. We saw the house in which I grew up, the only church I ever joined, the grade school I attended, the cemetery in which my parents were buried, and a visit to the last church I had served in Brooklyn. It was all new to Barbara. It was fun to give a glimpse of where I was born and where my formative years were spent. It was also, for me, a time of nostalgia, a time of memories I had not recalled in many years. I was amazed at how clear they were. I could almost hear and see people from my past.

Although it had been many years since visiting these old haunts, I went to each of them without directions, without maps, and without GPS. Which, if you know anything about me, was amazing. I can, as I have often been reminded, get lost in a paper bag. My sense of direction is, to say the least, not a strong suit. I, somewhat jokingly say, I have discovered more places by accident than I ever did on purpose. Riding with me can often be an unexpected adventure. On the way home Barbara marveled at how I found my way through Brooklyn, after thirty plus years since living there, and never once got lost. However, I was not surprised. Even now it would not surprise me. There is a sense of home in the old neighborhood, a sense of belonging. Most of us can understand that.

A few days after the Brooklyn trip, I attended a weekly Bible study groups with a group of ministerial colleagues. It was the week before Easter. The topic for the morning was “Preaching the Easter Story.” Skip, a good friend, with whom I was ordained in 1965, noted, ***it is the story we know by heart, because that is where it lives.*** Skip is like that. He gets right to the point. Who, of us, does not know the story? Who, among us, cannot repeat most of it without being prompted? Hearing, I suppose, is like going home. We know the way. We are familiar with it at a very deep level. It helps explain why we are here this morning. We know where we are going, we know the message. It is familiar and we feel good hearing it again. Like the trip to Brooklyn, there is an attraction. We long for the familiar, long for a time when things seemed surer and simpler, for times when a kiss on a sore knee really did take away a pain. We long for a comforting word that cheers us, that eases our doubts and pains.

Who knows what drew the three women, in Luke’s account of the first Easter, to the tomb that morning? Ostensibly, they came to anoint the body of Jesus, as was the custom. But surely it was more than that! Surely there was nostalgia, a need to

touch and see a bit of the most recent past. Surely there was the need, which accompanies grief, to come to terms with the new reality. Jesus was not a part of their past. Likely, they were reliving details of their experiences with him, if not to each other, at least in their own minds and hearts. Perhaps they even smiled now and then, as a particularly pleasant memory came to mind. In some ways, the trip to the tomb, was a trip to yesterday. It carried an air of nostalgia.

But, were they surprised! It was not the trip they expected. It was not as gloomy as they had feared.

***They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.***

What in the world was going on? What had happened?

***While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.***

Now they were in unfamiliar territory. They were lost. Now they sensed that yesterday could not be revisited. Now they knew that whatever happened, there was no going back. The prospect scared them half to death.

***The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground...***

Who could blame them? Who would not understand their fear?

They needed someone or something to make sense out of it all. They needed to be led from the unfamiliar territory to a more familiar place. They needed an explanation.

***Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.***

Here was that someone or something. Here was the direction needed. Now they could leave this unfamiliar spot and go home. There was no need to stay at the grave. This was too good to be true. They had to tell someone. Perhaps their friends would help them understand the meaning of these strange realities.

***...and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.***

Their moment of being lost becomes a moment of certainty. Doubt and fear becomes a moment of hope and fulfillment. No matter anything else, it had to be shared with the others. After all, the others were feeling the same sense of being lost, the same doubt and fear they so recently knew. They had to tell them. It would help them, even as it was helping them.

***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.***

How often I have been lost, not having a clue about where I wanted to be! And how often, this was before GPS, Barbara would suggest we ask someone. Guess who often boldly resisted asking?

I will find my own way has often been my preferred response.

Does anyone recognize this response?

We like to pretend we do not need help.

We have been told that God is the source of direction for our lives, that God is the author of life and resurrection, that God can take the deadness of our lives and bring life and newness to them. We have heard how the first disciples dismissed the resurrection experience as an idle tale.

We have moved through crises in relationships, often making them worse, because we have dismissed resurrection as an idle tale and not a real possibility. Why should our partner be forgiven? Won't such an act invite more hurt, rather than new life? This, in fact, when not forgiving leads to the outcome we fear most - a destroyed relationship.

We have moved through times of disappointment, often ending up bitter because we have heard the good news of resurrection as an idle tale. Our children have done things that hurt us and we allow estrangement to follow. Our jobs have not taken us where we dreamed they should and we have become angry and resentful. Our friends have not always responded as we think they should, and we have cut them out of our lives. And all because we hear a new truth as an idle tale.

We have moved through the death of our loved ones, living in grief and sorrow, having dismissed what we thought had to be an idle tale.

We know this story as well. *It is, in fact, one we know by heart, because that is where it lives.*

Yet we live too much of our lives dismissing the possibility that resurrection, new life, is for those who listen, way more than an idle tale. The resurrection is God's way out of confusion, bitterness, and grief. In the group that Skip told us we *know the story by heart*, Jeannette, another friend said *I don't work harder on my Easter sermon than on any others. I assume I cannot do any better than telling God's story. I cannot improve on God.* I cannot either. Can you? Hear the end of Luke's telling of this amazing story,

*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.*

No matter what you do with this story, it tells us Peter was willing to see for himself.

You see, there is an empty tomb, a dead spot in every one of our lives. God can and will raise us from every and any death we experience. That is the story. I cannot improve on it and will not even try to do so. All I can do is dare to look into the tomb and see for myself. When I have done so, my life has been better for it.

*...Peter got up and ran to the tomb...then he went home amazed at what had happened.*

Peter discovered the truth, the resurrection happened for him in the present tense, in the moment he was willing to let his assumptions be challenged.

Hear the Easter announcement, not as history, but as an announcement in the present moment. It is always heard in the present tense.

*He is not here. He is risen.*

*Because he lives, I too can live.*

Jeanette was, and is, right. We can't do better than that. Happy Easter!