

**Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022**

**Pastor Norman Fowler**

**“More Than An Idle Tale”**

**Prayer: Lord, we are thankful for this opportunity to be together, to sing these wonderful Easter hymns, and to think about what this day means. We wonder about this day, at your power and your purpose. Lord as we think about it together, as we listen to these scriptures, and we ask our questions, guide us in our thoughts. Indeed, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be useful and acceptable in your sight, in the building of our faith and our entry into your resurrection. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray.**

As I was driving home last night through a snowstorm, I thought about how it felt like a night that fits with Holy Saturday night, that night in between Jesus death and resurrection, a time when everything seemed dark. The wind was howling, the snow was flying, and it didn't seem like a time anyone would want to be out. I worried about driving on the roads. That time on the road made me think about these disciples who are waiting between those two days not knowing what was to come, sitting in their own despair, and through their own uncertainty and fear. When we read a little further we'll find that in another passage they end up sitting in an upper room afraid of the authorities, so they spend that Saturday in despair, in fear and uncertainty worrying about what will happen next. What will be their future? Jesus is gone. He's dead.

It's interesting to me that a few of the women don't let all that fear keep them from going to the tomb. Just because Jesus was dead, their care for him didn't stop. They went ahead and went to the tomb. As they arrived and found the tomb stone rolled away and empty, they had what can only be described as one of the most exciting religious experiences of their whole lives. They saw two men it says were dazzling. They asked why do you look for the living among the dead! He has risen! So, they get up and run back to tell the other disciples who don't necessarily join in their excitement. They hear them out but then suggest they're just overexcited, it's an idle tale. That is one of the ways to deal with the unexpected, the things that are hard to understand, or things we don't want to pay attention to because they might change things, deny the possibility. One way to (not) deal with the problem well is to simply deny it. It's an idle tale.

Sometimes it feels to me like Christianity has been a problem for society. One way to dismiss the problem is for people to simply look at it and say it's an idle tale, or worse we can solve the world's problems without that idle tale. Those of us who appreciate reason sometimes think we can reason it out – that we can get through our problems if we just use our best ability through reason and logic. I happen to like logic, but I find that what often happens when we begin to have such discussions is that not everybody else sees my logic quite the way I do! I find it interesting how we can both use reason and find different answers. Then if the problem is important enough to us, if the problem we are reasoning out will affect our lives, such as if it might be dangerous, or if it's something we don't like the answers the reasoning is giving, it is hard to stick with reasoning. Using reasoning to think about something hard may tempt us to move beyond reasoning. Indeed, our feelings may get in the way, and we try to find another way

to deal with it. For example, denial. Maybe denial is just a way to use blame and if that doesn't work, we will look for another way to assuage our feelings and our fears.

As we really look at Jesus' encounter with the religious authorities of his day, we might notice the conflict erupting. First, they want people to deny that he has anything to say, and then they blame him for saying things that aren't true, or for being heretical. And if that is not enough to keep people from listening to him, they decide to force the issue, that is actually use violence to get rid of the guy, crucify him. Once you've used violence then you've got to have a justification, a story, a way to describe the situation. This is really a manipulation of what people believe happened. It becomes a cautionary tale, that is, we say look what happens to people who do this.

Jesus' message of love of neighbor, even of one's enemy, of service to others, of compassion, and of drawing closer to God, doesn't seem to matter when it gets in the way of the hold on power and control some have. But surely that was in Jesus' day. Do we see those dynamics working in our day? Blame? Force? Violence? Manipulation of the story? Why is Jesus and his message such a problem? What is so radical about Jesus' message to love our neighbors, to serve one another, to show compassion, to grow closer to God? I don't know about you, but I feel some of those pressures today as well. Why are we told we are not supposed to love the migrant? Why can't we heal racism? Why can't we assure the mentally ill are all living healthy lives? Why don't we alleviate the ravages of poverty? The list goes on. I wonder what we're afraid of if we make changes that enable us to care for one another? Who would be ruined if we love our neighbors? Our enemies? What if we serve one another, are we worried our lives would somehow be less meaningful?

God comes in Jesus and is rejected, tortured, and dies as a result of the way humans deal with their problems. Now, hopefully we don't always deal with them that way, but it seems all too common. WE can see the roots of violence in our desire to solve our problems. I find it fascinating that we really are given in this story a contrast between the way humanity has so often tried to solve its problems and how God does. God sends the Son, and he makes a little bit of a stir. People start listening, he teaches and offers interesting ways of thinking about how we should live together. But, then, he is rejected and crucified.

What response does God make? What might be done with humanity? I know the feeling that too often comes to me when I feel like I've been wronged. I feel I should get revenge. Yet, in Jesus rising again, he doesn't come swinging a sword to avenge his death. No, instead Jesus rises and begins to enter into people's lives. Jesus begins to invite people to recognize that what he taught is not dead and buried and gone for good. Indeed, God is not defeated by human evil. God's grace is still possible and available and real hope lies within God's grace. Jesus begins to invite those who are willing to see that perhaps this isn't just an idle tale.

I think of Peter sitting there with the rest of them as they heard the women. Most, we read, said this is an idle tale. But what did Peter do? He went to see for himself. That is at least one thing this day is about; it's an invitation to see for ourselves. We are invited to hear the story and then to notice how we have experienced resurrection and renewed hope through grace. Perhaps not in an actual empty tomb or embodied Jesus, but what if we take a look. Might we find it's more than an idle tale?

Peter encounters a living Jesus. I would suggest that many believers over time feel they have encountered a living Jesus. Jesus did not necessarily walk into their room and break bread with them in quite the way we describe here. And yet, some of us have found in the breaking of bread the grace of God, some of us have found in looking for Jesus a love that was beyond our imagination, a hope that doesn't die, a goodness that pulls us into life. We recognize life itself is a gift and in finding it a gift we recognize it is beyond any expectation. It becomes instead a force that draws us into a joy that comes from not worrying about how we will live, but the joy that comes from having a life to live. This resurrection day seems like a day that invites us to recognize this joy.

Resurrection is a contrast to a life focused on worry. Am I going to worry about whether I am well off enough, am I going to worry about how life is not meeting my expectations or fear that others will limit me or worry about whether I am getting all one should get out of life? Is life a constant worry about what we don't have or are afraid we will lose? Jesus invites us in his teaching to let go of these worries and embodies the way God offers us life beyond our worries.

The resurrection invites us to let go and to allow the grace of God to hold us and invite us to live life as a gift each moment. It is not something we possess, but that is a gift given moment by moment. We are invited to find in each next moment there is a joy in living. It is easy for me to say, I haven't been through that much. This idea that there's a joy in living life is something that Viktor Frankl has described, and he lived through the concentration camps of World War II. He said despite everything being gone, having nothing left of his own, knowing the gift of life in the midst of that nothingness still pulled him forward into life.

I believe it is God's grace that we need despite our rejection of Jesus, despite our taking life for granted and worrying so much about how life goes and struggling even with God over our desire to be in charge achieving our own 'success'. We struggle with God's gift to us and can make it just an idle tale. Yet, when we do that, we don't then acknowledge the grace of God first given us just in life itself and then as God continues to come, to enter, to encourage, and to draw us out of our disappointments and fear of death into the resurrection. Out of the moments that feel so hard, we recognize that there is a next moment, and recognize in those moments where I don't feel loved but there is one who loves us. Acknowledging and trusting that one, our God, pulls into a new life of love, service and compassion, where we find the joy that is possible in such a life. And when we are attuned to that joy, we are able to arise despite the worst of human actions.

Jesus' disciples don't always seem to understand what's happening. They have feelings of despair and anxiety; they see it as an idle tale. Yet Peter looks further, goes and looks to see, to explore. Peter finds that though Jesus died because of human attempts to silence, sunder, and smear him as a problem, God counters with an invitation to redemption, reconciliation, and renewed life in the resurrection. Rather than vengeance, God saves. Instead of force, God gives grace. Instead of a diminution of life, God invites us into a new life through Christ's resurrection. Instead of anger and fear of losing life, God invites us into the joy of life, the joy of the resurrection. He has risen. He is risen indeed!