

SERMON: No Joke

TEXT: Luke 24:1-12

Well, we've been hearing for months now about how Easter falls on April Fools Day this year, and I've seen a number of clever ideas from practical jokers who are taking advantage of this opportunity. Some have suggested that you send your kids out hunting for eggs that aren't there! Others have carefully taken the foil off chocolate eggs and used it to wrap up grapes instead. On Pinterest I've seen pictures of small carrot sticks and other vegetables put in plastic eggs. For the adults, how about meatloaf and mashed potatoes shaped to look like a cupcake? Then, of course, someone came up with this question: If the first Easter was on April Fools Day, was the resurrection a prank? This brings to mind all kinds of scenarios that many would find inappropriate, if not downright heretical. So, let's not go there.

On the other hand, most of the people worshipping in mainline protestant churches would agree that we don't take the Bible literally. We understand that the creation story is just that: a story. We believe that God created, but we doubt that it actually happened in seven days' time.

Betsey was an elderly woman in my last church who had always been very faithful Christian and was still very active in the church. In fact, her son had gone into ministry and was a classmate of mine in seminary. Betsey attended a weekly Bible Study that I led, and she was very honest about her beliefs. Whenever we came across a passage with some miraculous event – like Moses parting the Red Sea or even the Virgin Birth – Betsey would come up with some logical explanation that would nullify the miracle. “Well, the waters of the Red Sea didn’t really part; there was some natural phenomenon that the culture didn’t know how to explain.” And, “No, Mary wasn’t a virgin, but the writer was using hyperbole to emphasize how extra-special and holy she was.”

Even when I or someone else in the room would try to convince Betsey that God was all-powerful and could do anything, she remained skeptical and frankly, unapologetic. But she was skeptical only about the details. Not about God. She fully embraced God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and she lived her life as a faithful and loving servant of her Lord and Savior.

So, you can imagine what Betsey thought about the resurrection of Christ. She tried to explain it away as a figment of the imagination of people devastated by loss and blinded by grief.

I am not here to prove or disprove the physical resurrection of Jesus. Because the truth and power of resurrection goes much deeper than a corpse being revived. My purpose is to help us discover and experience and believe the life-giving power and undying love of God in the resurrection of God's son. Believe me when I say, "It is NO JOKE."

Normally, we hear John's version of that first Easter morning. But I wanted to share Luke's version with you today because of a particular detail that is not found in the gospel of John. After telling us about the women finding the empty tomb and hearing from two men in dazzling clothes that Jesus had risen from the dead, Luke wrote this: "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."

"It seemed to them an idle tale." In English, the word "idle" means unfounded, having no basis in fact. In the original Greek, it was even stronger. It meant, "delirious." The idea that Jesus was alive was crazy, utter nonsense. Even Jesus' closest companions, who'd been with him night and day for three years, *and* whom he had told he would rise again, didn't believe it at first. Of course, it was *women* who told the story, and we know how they were treated in

Biblical times! On the other hand, it was astonishing enough that anyone would want to see for himself. So, “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.”

It IS astonishing and unbelievable. It DOES sound like a joke. But the truth of the resurrection is that the stone *has* been rolled away.

We all have stones in our lives; large, immovable stones that become obstacles that keep us from living our lives to the fullest, barriers that keep us in the cold darkness, walls that keep us from seeing the light and feeling the sunshine. Stones like chronic illness or debilitating disease, broken relationships, trauma from your past, addiction, abuse, financial struggles. Such circumstances can make us feel more dead than alive.

But with Jesus, we are never alone in our pain. He suffered, too. He understands all our sorrows.

Now, belief in the resurrection won't make all your troubles disappear. But the stone in front of the tomb did not disappear either. It simply was moved;

moved out of the way so that Jesus could get past it and move from death to life. Through faith and hope, we can move past our pain, too.

The truth of the resurrection is that new life happens. You may remember that bumper sticker from years ago that read – and I’ll edit this for sensitive ears – “stuff” happens. We know how true this is. So much stuff happens to us that we didn’t ask for, that we don’t deserve, that we have no control over. But resurrection happens, too. Sometimes that belief is the only thing that gets us through all the other stuff.

The truth of the resurrection is that Jesus knows us and loves us and speaks our name to call us out of our deepest pain. Just as in the Gospel of John, when the risen Jesus spoke Mary’s name while she was weeping outside the tomb, and she recognized him. And her grief turned to joy.

The truth of the resurrection is that the tomb is empty, and death does not have the last word. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, and as we proclaimed in the Call to Worship: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ...God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Furthermore, we also know from Paul's letter to the Romans that there is nothing, nothing, nothing in life or in death or in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

One of my favorite stories at Easter time comes from nearly a century ago, when a Russian Communist leader named Nikolai Bukharin was addressing a huge assembly in Kiev on the subject of atheism. He concluded his speech saying, "There is no God. Jesus Christ never existed. There is no such thing as a Holy Spirit. The Church is an oppressive institution and is out of date. The future belongs to the State, and the State is in the hands of the Party."

Deafening silence filled the auditorium until an old priest stood and requested of Bukharin, "May I say three words?" The lecturer disdainfully gave his permission. The priest turned to face the crowd, looked out over all of them and then shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "Christ is risen!" En masse the crowd arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: "He is risen indeed!"

Just three small words were all it took to restore the hope of the people and to speak their answer to tyranny.

It may be April Fools Day, but this is NO JOKE. Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!) We are Easter people – resurrection people – and alleluia is our song! To the glory of God!

AMEN.