

April 16, 2017

Resurrection Sunday

## Then They Remembered

Annette Hill Briggs

Luke 24:1-12

*[The Resurrection of Jesus]*

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup> but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup> While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup> that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." <sup>8</sup> Then they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup> and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup> Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup> 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.*

Nothing in their lives up to that point prepared Jesus' most devoted followers for the possibility that what he said was going to happen in Jerusalem *actually* would happen. He repeated it multiple times, in the plainest speech possible. But still, nothing. They didn't believe he'd die – until he did. They certainly didn't believe he'd rise – until he did.

Are we better people than them, friends? Wiser, braver, more faithful? I couldn't say. But I am moved to wonder again about the difference between what I believe and what I **think** I believe. Or what it means to believe anything at all. To believe in something is to live as though that thing, that idea, is true and trustworthy. To bet your life on it: your life; your heart, mind, soul, strength; money, time, everything – without proof, scientific or rational. All day, every day, acting out of *trust*.

At home, at work, at school, at the bank, in the car, alone in our thoughts and plans, *believing, trusting* – with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength – something we cannot see or hear, something we cannot point out to others to prove that what we claim is true.

There are people – and I do say this lightly or as a joke – people who are diagnosed and medicated for claiming to see and hear things the rest of us cannot see and hear. My friend Mike absolutely believed that his caseworker had a key to his apartment and used

it to sneak in and arrange dental floss in certain patterns Mike would find threatening. Mike called the sheriff. Mike got put on the 5th floor of Bloomington Hospital for 10 days. But here's the thing: nobody even tried to prove the caseworker WASN'T doing that.

Is believing someone threatened you with dental floss more or less outrageous than believing in dead people coming back to life after three days? One is delusional; the other is Christian – which is simply to say: let us not fail to see what an audacious thing we claim here today, in believing in the resurrection of the dead.

Ken Burns' documentary The War includes a resurrection story I love. A young man from Alabama was stationed in the Philippines when the US surrendered to the Japanese in March of 1942. He was so badly beaten on the March of Bataan, he thought he would surely die. So he tossed his dog tags into a mass grave of dead Americans. His idea was that his family might have the comfort of knowing approximately when and where he'd died.

But he didn't die. He spent the entire war in a Japanese prison camp. The grave was found and his family informed of his death, but he didn't know that. So when he landed in San Francisco in the fall of 1945, he called home to Alabama and his sister answered the phone. When she heard his voice, she passed out cold on the kitchen floor. So his Auntie picked up the phone and said, "*Who is this?!*" And then *she* passed out on the floor. So his uncle took the phone and said, "What in the world is going on? *Oh. . . Well, I told them you wasn't dead!*" They were Christian folks, folks who assumed belief in resurrection, still knocked to the floor to find out it's true.

Again, Friends, especially in a world so full of death, from inside lives that are so full of loss, it can sometimes be awfully easy to forget what an audacious thing it is to believe in the resurrection of the dead. Death is so easy to prove. But an *empty tomb* isn't proof! It's evidence.

The disciples had been through three days of terror and death – which may not be over yet, now that a body is missing. Oh, and angels! Angels asking questions. It's awfully easy to fuss at those first disciples for being so quick to forget what Jesus told them, face-to-face, in person. To pretend that if *we'd* been there, we'd have been so much wiser to Jesus' leadership than those yahoos. . . so much stronger and braver at following him than those cowards. And my guess is, the further from Easter we stray, the easier our forgetting becomes.

Easter, our highest holy day. The day we remember and celebrate God's permanent solution to humanity's most crushing problem, the inability of saving ourselves from death. The Alabaman knew he'd die. All he could hope to do was offer a shred of comfort to his family. We cannot save ourselves from death, and so God saved us. One singular salvation event – Jesus the Christ. Once. For all. One event. For all people. For all time. For ever.

At least five women went to the cemetery expecting to find the quickly wrapped, filthy, bloody, broken body of Jesus, who had been buried by a stranger. Because why? Because not a single person who claimed to be his friend turned out to be his friend when HE needed a friend; when being his friend was risky; when being his friend actually cost them something. *Two men in dazzling clothes*, Luke says. *The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground as the angels asked their questions.* Questions, I suggest this Easter morning, that the gospel has asked the church and disciples like us ever since; questions posing as reminders, prompting us to re-member, to put back together what so easily pulls apart, the further from Easter we drift.

We re-member what *we most need of God* to what **only** God has given.

Here are the questions:

- Why do you look for the living among the dead, when he has risen? (This one I'm saving for another day.)
- Don't you remember what he told you: that this world would kill him and then he would rise again?

Asked by the angels in the doorway of an empty tomb, Luke says, the women remembered. They haven't even seen him yet, but information and the evidence suggest a reality so incredible they can hardly bear to think about it.

It's not the same at all, but kind of the same as when I first **realized** I could read. I was about six years old when it really locked in. I'd been sounding out words in the first grade Bluebirds reading group and with my mother. But then one day, at home, I just read something ordinary like a cereal box. I couldn't believe it at first, because I thought reading was something I could only do at school out of a Dick and Jane novel. It felt like a trick, so I went around the house picking up things with print. *Can I read this? Can I read this?* It worked every time. It was amazing. I could hardly sleep for being so excited to see if I would still be able to do it the next day.

I went to school for 21 more years. I had other experiences of enlightenment. None was as breathtaking as that day when I was six, when I realized I had broken a code; I never had to ask anyone to read anything to me again; my world was an entirely different place than it had been the day before.

The women at the cemetery cannot get back to the others fast enough! Their response is not unlike my younger siblings' when I immediately began to brag that I could read and they couldn't. "Nu-uh!" Peter says, "Oh yeah, prove it," and goes to see the evidence for himself. Not the proof – the evidence. He is amazed all the same. In his commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock points out that "*Faith does not usually move from promise to fulfillment but from fulfillment to promise.*" (*Interpretation*, p.283) Meaning, faith comes from promises kept, not promises made.

*Faith comes from promises kept, not promises made.*

Maybe Jesus' friends had such a hard time hearing his words about what would happen in Jerusalem, because they sounded more like premonitions than promises.

Premonitions they didn't **want** to hear, so they didn't hear. They didn't want to hear Jesus say that when he got to Jerusalem *the world was going to take hold of him and kill him*. Maybe because that's what the world does to everyone. That's the everyday business of this world. So they didn't listen. And not listening, they didn't hear the rest. They didn't hear the promise. *And on the third day rise again*. They hear the words, but those were words. Words with no connection to anything in their lives, until that day at the cemetery. That empty grave and those psychedelic angels – where the words Jesus said back in Galilee all of the sudden mean something entirely different. Something breathtaking. The world, their own lives, their life together – all of it suddenly, exponentially, deeper and wider and bigger and – *wow* – eternal. To begin to think about the reach of resurrection into reality as they knew it was staggering. Every word for describing it falls short. Preaching is futile. Singing is better. Just living it joyfully, as if every single day is Easter – probably best of all.