

## Too Good Not to Be True

A reflection given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 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. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 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. 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.*

(Luke 24:1-12, NRSV)

It had all been like a fairy tale. For three unforgettable years, these former fishermen and their friends had been on the most amazing adventure. These all-so ordinary people found themselves learning and seeing and doing more than they ever thought possible:

- Experiencing the mother-of-all wedding parties with the best wine in the world
- Witnessing 5000 people getting fed with five loaves and two fish
- Knocking tables over in a Temple rabble-rouse
- Having front row seats for ALL the wonderful, crazy things that Jesus said and did!

What a journey! What a story! But now it was over.

Perhaps they should have known better. Perhaps they should have seen it coming. In hindsight, it was just too good to be true. Jesus was a dreamer, and we all know how it goes with dreamers, especially dreamers who challenge systems of injustice and death: the powers-that-be finally got fed up with Jesus and ... killed him. Game over.

It had been beautiful. But as the horrific reality of that Friday came crashing in on them, the terrible truth was that this fairy tale was over, with an ending which breaks the heart. In its place came cold, hard reality. It was all *too good* to be true.

The Bible seems to deal a lot in "too good to be true." Recall the Isaiah passage a few minutes ago? It served up a little utopia for your Easter Sunday morning ... a vision of God's creation of new heavens and a new earth ...

- A new Jerusalem in which the sound of weeping will be heard no more

- A new world in which no more will there be born infants who only live a few days
- A new order in which all of God's children build and plant in freedom, and not in servitude to others
- "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" the prophecy tells us ... Thus says the Lord.

That sounds great. It sounds *really* nice. Meanwhile ...

- The chaotic, destructive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue unabated, as lives and livelihoods are destroyed
- The world's most desperate still starve,
- Innocent lives are still torn apart by terrorism and war
- Children are still shot in schools
- Families seeking to flee from unspeakable horrors are still treated like criminals
- Money and power still determine reality
- The planet still groans as it becomes an increasingly inhospitable place

So, bring them on, these new heavens and new earth! Sounds wonderful. Meanwhile, the *real* world rolls indifferently on, leaving behind fairy tales which are too good to be true.

This is the realization that came crashing down around these first disciples. And so, in the wake of the Cross, we find them shattered, confused, and in despair, not knowing what to do or where to turn. They are lost and broken, afraid and alone.

But how *could* they go on, with things having happened as they did? How do you pick up the pieces of a life that has fallen apart? The women in our text at least have it in them to go back to the tomb, to prepare Jesus' body according to Jewish burial customs, as painful as *that* must have been. But when they get there, they find the huge stone rolled away. Wondering what's going on, they walk anxiously to it and look inside. They see nothing – no body, no Jesus – which leaves them even more confused and afraid.

And then, from within the deep darkness of this tomb, they see an impossible sight – two men in dazzling clothes beside them. Understandably, they fall to the ground in mortal terror. But then they hear these impossible words: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

You can only imagine the thoughts and emotions flooding their hearts and minds in this moment: Astonishment ... wonder ... doubt ... a glimmer of hope ... perhaps all of these at the same time. Whatever it is, it's not something they can let go of.

"Here is not here. He is risen." Is it even possible? But then Jesus *did* say something about rising again on the third day! And so, with a mix of faith, doubt, and desperation, they go and tell the apostles and others what they saw and heard.

And ... the apostles don't believe them.

Their story is dismissed as an "idle tale" – a fairy tale too good to be true – though they too know what Jesus had said. Maybe they are just being men dismissing women for being too emotional, telling them that they're not being rational (By the way, guys – that's NEVER a good idea 😊). Sure, they *want* to believe it ... they'd give *anything* for it to be true ... but they just can't get burned again. Time to take a deep breath and let it go.

But here's my favorite part of the text: In spite of the fact that the apostles are said to have dismissed the women's story, Peter gets up and runs to the tomb! We're given no reason to think that he didn't doubt their story either. The other gospel accounts, too, suggest that Peter, the "Rock," was just as unable to accept it as any of the others. And *yet*, something in him drives him to run to the tomb to see!

*Why*, do you think? Did his desire to believe it temporarily overcome his fear of looking like a fool again? Or did he simply long more than anything to be given one more chance to say goodbye ... one more chance to fall at Jesus' feet and say, through broken tears, "I'm sorry"?

Or did some small part of him wonder, after all he had seen, that maybe – just maybe – this story could have a happy ending after all?

In the face of what we experience as cold, hard reality, these calls to hope, these hints of life, these visions of a new world may seem well-intentioned, but pointless. Tempered by what we call the facts, we might call this message from the tomb a fairy tale – too good to be true. You know that Peter struggled with this in his own heart and mind, and no doubt, those today who long for a new world struggle with this in the face of every senseless death, every cruelty without justice, every irredeemable loss.

Maybe it *is* just a fairy tale – this message of hope out of despair, of new life arising from death. But you know, there's something about fairy tales. Something that our greatest storytellers know, and have always known. In our modern jadedness, to call something a fairy tale is to say that it's something less than true. But the greatest storytellers have always known that fairy tales are not *less* than true, but *more*. The fairy tales of old may have in them all kinds of fantastic things ... mythical monsters ... dragons even, but they are *more* than true, all the same, as Neil Gaiman has said – not because they tell us that dragons exist, *but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten*.

My friends, this is really the choice that the message of Easter presents us. Whether, in the face of our world-weariness, to write the message off as a fairy tale too good to be true and turn away, or to hear and receive a summons to new life, reborn from the ashes of the old ... To find healing for our own lives and for the world in the embrace of a Love that longs for expression in and through us.

And to do this means a leap of faith. You might have figured that would come up eventually on a day like this. But by this I don't mean what you can or cannot imagine about what literally happened one Sunday morning 2000 years ago. What I mean is that, however you understand it, we are willing to leap beyond what present themselves as hard facts ... to step beyond those limits into a life, into a world, that has to be *believed* to be seen.

Over many years of striving for a faith to which I could give my *mind and* my heart, I long figured that accepting the truth of the miracle – accepting that Jesus *really did* rise from the dead – was the great hurdle that had to be jumped. But as I've walked this journey for more than 30 years, I've found something surprising. I've found that the truth of Resurrection is not just about something far away in the distant past, but a truth tested and borne out in the here and now.

The past is filled with all kinds of strange and wonderful things, but it's living *now* – living now, each and every new day, with hope and courage and joy – that requires a special kind of leap, because you know that life and the world don't make it easy. Simply living with hope, courage, and joy in these days requires our being willing to leap beyond what makes strict, rational sense, and to step beyond the limits of our fear and despair. That's certainly a big enough leap for any of us!

That's what Peter does. And that's what the women who go to the tomb do. From this day, they will no longer look for the living among the dead. They will move forward. They will go back home – to Galilee – and *there* they will see him: *Home* ... where his mission was first launched ... where his words were first heard ... where his works of compassion are still manifest in healed bodies and lives. *There* they *will* see him. *There* they will find their lives again.

And as with them, so with us. We are left as those first disciples on that first Easter morning ... confronted with our own summons to leave behind our tombs of fear and to live forward into ever new shapes of Beauty, Life, and Love. May this story of Jesus, this story of his first disciples, may be *our* story too!

Now, of course, we'll just have to wait for that ultimate happy ending, as with a fairy tale, in which everything finally comes together. Living and believing and trusting in the meantime isn't easy. And so, as Frederick Buechner asked, what is the preacher to do with all this ... to do with this Easter tale of resurrection?

What is the preacher to do? I have tried to follow his advice:

“Let the preacher tell the truth. Let the preacher preach this overcoming of tragedy by comedy, of darkness by light, of the ordinary by the extraordinary, as the tale that is too good *NOT* to be true, because to dismiss it as untrue is to dismiss along with it that catch of the breath, that beat and lifting of the heart, near to or even accompanied by tears, which I believe is the deepest intuition of truth that we have.”

My friends, today is a day to rejoice – for on this day we confess our faith that this story of Cross and Resurrection, of Death and Life, is supreme. It is *our* story, and it is *more* than true. It's too good not to be.

*Christ is risen ... He is risen indeed ... Alleluia!*