

Too Good Not to Be True

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022
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 most ordinary of people had heard and followed a call, and found themselves learning and doing and seeing 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
- ... Tallying an astonishing ex-leper count
- ... Knocking tables over in a Temple rabble-rouse
- ... And just being there for ALL the wonderful, crazy things that Jesus said and did!

What a journey! What a story! What a long, strange trip it had been. But now it was over.

They had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the promised one who would set them free from the Romans, put down the indifferent elites, and finally lift up the poor and the disenfranchised. They had pinned all their hopes on him, had left everything behind to follow him all the way.

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 ... just killed him. Done. Over.

They had lived a wonderful fairy tale. But as the horrific reality of that Friday came crashing in on them, the terrible truth was that all this *was* a fairy tale, but one now replaced by cold, hard reality – with an ending that breaks the heart. The truth hurts: It was all *too good* to be true.

The Bible seems to deal a lot in “too good to be true.” Were you listening when Nan read the Isaiah passage a few minutes ago? It served up a little utopia for your Easter Sunday morning ... It’s 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 nice. It sounds *really* nice. Meanwhile ...

... The world’s most desperate still starve,
... Those in their prime receive grim diagnoses, while others linger on and on far beyond the capacity to enjoy the time they have
... Innocent lives are still torn apart by terrorism and war, in Ukraine and elsewhere
... 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 it on, this *new world*! Sounds wonderful. Meanwhile, the *real* world rolls indifferently on, leaving in the dust 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 ... the thought that perhaps I should have taken my medication ... 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 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 (Let me just say to you husbands out there: saying that to your wife is ALWAYS a bad idea ... I know 😊). 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 astonishing 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? Was he not firm enough in his doubt? Did his desire to believe it temporarily overcome his fear of looking like a fool again? Or did he simply long for 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 may call this message from the tomb a fairy tale – too good to be true. No doubt, Peter struggled with this within his own heart and mind, and no doubt, those today who look and long for a new world struggle with it 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 the ashes of despair, this message of new life arising from the dusts of death. But you know, there's something about fairy tales that our greatest storytellers know and have always known.

In our modern cynicism, to call something a fairy tale is to say that it's something ... *less than true*. But our 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 ... great adventures, magic, mythical monsters ... dragons even ... but as Neil Gaiman has said, they are *more than true* all the same, 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 a new life, reborn from the ashes of the old ... To find healing for our lives and for the world in the embrace of a greater 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 concerning what literally happened one Sunday morning 2000 years ago. What I mean is that, however we 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.

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. On this day and always, this story of Jesus, this story of his first disciples, may be *our* story too!

As Paul Raushenbush has written,

Easter can be that moment when we all become [like those] women and venture out in defiance of death to honor truth, love, justice, and life and find that even in the midst of death we are in life, as we encounter that Divine life that would not die. Even if Easter is not magic, and does not and cannot relieve all of our pain, sorrow, and sickness; in Easter we know life in that encounter with the risen one who loves us unto death. In Easter, even if it is not magic, and maybe it is, we will no longer be afraid of death or those who deal death, but will rise and keep rising with our sisters and brothers, and rise and rise like a moon that gives light, even if it is not blinding, to show us the Way.

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, and all the unknowns are known, and all the questions

answered. And 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? His advice I have tried to follow:

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.

And so, my dear 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. And it is *more* than true. It's too good not to be.

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