

Luke 24: 1-12 “An Idle Tale?” Rev. Janet Chapman 4/20/25

We started off worship with the Easter greeting “Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed!” But I wonder sometimes how easy or difficult is that affirmation for any of us? Do we find ourselves saying it just because of everybody else? Is it an idle tale, just random talk, as the disciples claimed in our text? Not because it came from the mouths of women, but because it is ridiculous, illogical, and impossible? How would you have responded if you were told that Jesus had risen from the dead? Even the angels said so. Would we have run like Peter to check out the tomb and then still ponder what had happened? Was it even Jesus’ body that got buried in that tomb or was it somebody else’s?

My favorite TCU professor in grad school tells a story of receiving a phone call, before the existence of caller ID, where a voice said, “Mr. Jet-er, if you can answer one simple question, then you will be eligible for our grand prize giveaway. And here’s that question: ‘Who’s buried in Grant’s tomb?’” Silence and more silence. “Uhhh. Mr. Jet-er, is that question too difficult?” Dr. Joey *Jeter* (*pronounced Gee-ter*) finally said it was a very complex and difficult question. He could think of at least four answers that he could make a case for: First, there is the most obvious answer: Grant. But like a lot of obvious answers, it is only partially true. Second, there is the historical answer. As one who lived across the street from Grant’s tomb in New York City for 5 years, Joey assured the caller that the mortal remains of Ulysses S. & Julia D. Grant were there, and by the way, they are sepulchered, not buried. Moving right along, there is the theological answer to the question, “Who’s buried in Grant’s tomb” which is, of course, “No one.” There are two corpses, but no one is at home in them. Finally, there is the philosophical answer, if you will. Nobody pronounces his name “Jet-er” except people who don’t know him and call him up wanting to sell him something. So he concluded, “My answer is colored by my wondering just what on earth my answer is going to cost me. So you see, it is not an easy question at all.” Silence, even more silence... click. Some would say this was the beginning of phone services that keep spam callers busy like Aura, Hiya, and Robokiller. Others would say that this is just

like a professor – you ask them what time it is and they tell you how to make a watch. This is the problem with higher education – many things that were once clear grow murky, because, in fact, they are murky. Only do they become clear when you have passed them through the crucible of your own struggle, pain, and growth.

A story is told of a young child at a birthday party who approached an adult in all seriousness and said, “I’m four now. I know everything.” The adult nodded because at four, you have got it covered. You can communicate, get around, do stuff, and you haven’t been to school yet to mess everything up. Even at my age of 63 today, (ugh) I would prefer sometimes not to have gone to school when it comes to the matter of resurrection. Because if the phone rings now, like it did for Joey, and I discover that I qualify for the grand prize giveaway by answering the question, “Who’s buried, or better yet, risen from Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb?”, I know deep down that that question is so large that it soars into infinity. It is the angels who counter with, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Then they speak four of the most beautiful words in the scriptures, “He is not here...”. We come to the tomb, where death has been sealed behind stone and Christ is simply not there. Death could not hold the beloved child of God. “Alleluia, Christ is risen!” And yet to say that, is to say much more than a dead man has been resuscitated.

Historically, we see its effect on people in the world. After Easter, Mary was changed from a mourner to a messenger, Thomas was changed from a doubter to a believer, Peter was changed from a denier to a preacher, and later on, Paul was changed from a persecutor to a missionary, and that small band in the upper room was changed from a sniveling band of has-beens to the church of Jesus Christ! And that is historical fact!

A story surfaced from the garlic capital of the world, Gilroy, about a little miracle named Shannon who was born to a mom, who was told years before that she would never have kids. Laurie carried twins for 3 ½ mos., but then one of them died in utero, while little Shannon showed her first courageous signs of never giving up. Yet tragically, at the age of 2½, little Shannon was diagnosed with cancer. Her doctors

said she wouldn't live long. She experienced two years of chemotherapy before a bone marrow transplant. She was told she would never walk again, but she walked everywhere, even though she only weighed 27 lbs. Of the many cancer kids her mother met at Stanford, Laurie noted, "The will these children have is miraculous!" Shannon was always full of enthusiasm, love and overwhelming concern for others around her. During her stay at Stanford, Shannon lost more best friends in a few short years to death than most elderly people do in a lifetime. During one of Shannon's more sober moments, she awoke in the middle of the night and begged her mom not to make her go to heaven. Laurie responded with voice breaking, "Dearest God, how I wish I could promise you that." Still Shannon's life was concentrated outside herself and her needs. One day, she saw a stranger walking by their home looking very sad so she ran outside, handed him a flower, and wished him a happy day. Another day, while coming out of anesthesia, she insisted upon knowing how her friends were doing and then asked, "And how are you doing, Mom?" At the tender age of 4, Shannon was hovering between life and death and her family knew it was time to go. Gathering around her bedside, they encouraged her to walk toward the light. She responded, "It's very bright, but I can see the angels, they are smiling at me." Her mom said it was ok to go to them for there was life and love there. Shannon frowned a bit, "They are singing very loud, but ok." Before they could ask what they were singing, Shannon was gone... I'd like to think they were singing about life's triumph over death, that Christ is risen...still a mystery to those of us who have never stood on the precipice between life and death, but to Shannon, a truth finally realized.

Answering the question of resurrection is murky and rarely clears up until we have processed it through the eyes of suffering, pain and struggle. It leads me to wonder, in the long run, what my answer will cost me. As Joey used to say, if it's just an idle tale and Jesus stays dead, we can keep doing business as usual, because nothing matters much and the paths of glory all lead to the grave. Love is just a sentimental, powerless thing and there is no power stronger than the sin that kills us, the greed, jealousy, hatred and lust for violence that binds us like strips of line cloth that bound

**Jesus for the grave. If it's an idle tale, we have nothing to say to young folks who open fire at their classmates, to refugees fleeing Ukraine, to a young mom standing at the casket of her child. But, if Christ is risen from Joseph's tomb, then who we are, what we do, and what we become matters immensely, because we are a part of God's great affirmation of life flung against the darkness of a dying universe. You and I being a part of that reality may cost us everything, but it will also give us the power to stand up against the powers of death and evil to lift high a blooming, empty cross and loudly sing with the angels, Christ is Risen, Christ is risen indeed! May it be so!**