

"The Fate of Idle Tales"
(sermon given 4/4/10 by Scott Jansen)
Luke 24:1-12

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[Prayer for Illumination] O God, you lift the veil of darkness and we awaken to the dawn of your glorious splendor. The stone is rolled away and there is life everlasting! As we seek to connect with you through hearing your Word, we rejoice that nothing can separate us from your love... Amen.

The Easter story as told by Luke. Listen now, for God's word for you....

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women 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.

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

Peter was amazed.... But, no one saw Jesus in the process of rising to new life. No one offered any explanations.... So, perhaps

this was an “idle tale”...--a story that sounds nice, maybe has a good message, but isn't based on anything real....

It could be a fairy tale, like Pinocchio. Pinocchio has a good message—if you tell a lie, you only get yourself deeper and deeper into trouble. There is truth in that message. Yet, everyone knows that Pinocchio is just a story—there isn't really a blue fairy who turns wooden puppets into real boys....

The disciples who heard the report of the women thought, at first, that it was just an idle tale—a story. Silliness. The sort of thing a pack of chatty women might say.... Wouldn't it be nice to imagine that those nasty Romans don't really have power over our lives after all? Yes, a joyful story..., but not to be taken too seriously—they were, after all, women, who conjured up this story—or so they thought....

The Greeks at the time knew how to put together a good, entertaining story. They had many theatrical plays, full of sex and low-brow humor.... But, nearly all of their plays perished long ago. Silly stories, idle tales—they're fun for awhile, but then they fade away.....

Ghost stories in ancient Rome were a dime a dozen. There was nothing unusual about a story where a person dies and his ghost roams around interfering with the lives of his old friends. There was nothing, from a literary standpoint, that would set the women's story apart as particularly creative, or unique. Thousands of similar stories had been told, and perished, before this one, and thousands more have been told, and perished, since....

Why did the story of Jesus... escape the usual fate of idle tales????? Why couldn't Peter just let out a hearty laugh like the rest of the apostles and let this little moment of hysteria pass without much thought? What did he really expect to see in that tomb???

Of course, it wasn't just the story of the women. Other stories soon followed—stories told by men—stories of a body; a body that did not look like Jesus, but somehow was Jesus; a body that could pass through walls, or vanish before your eyes. What kind of a body was this???? Paul would later call it, simply, “a spiritual body.”..... This body evoked a presence that was not recognized by appearance, not recognized by tone of voice, familiar scent or familiar laugh. The disciples claim Christ was recognized as a sense of “our hearts burning within us.”... Have you ever recognized Christ as a sense of your heart burning within you??????

Jesus said to his disciples, “just as the Father is in me, and I am in the father, so also you are in me, and I am in you.” So maybe we should try that out. Maybe it’s that simple. Maybe Christ was so very close to his disciples that he became a part of their souls, and even after he died, that part of their souls lived on, and worked through them. Maybe that’s all that it means to say that Christ rose from the dead and “lived” again....

No one would argue that that is a plausible theory..., precisely because such a theory could be applied to many people. We have all known someone who has died, but who lives on as a piece of our own soul. We know this form of “resurrection” from our own direct personal experience with it. So, for the same reason that it sounds very plausible, it also renders the story very common, very ordinary. And that leaves us with the unanswered question, why did Christ’s story not suffer the fate of idle tales?????

Well, let’s set the question of precisely how Jesus was resurrected aside for a moment. For now, let’s consider the effect that Christ’s resurrection, in whatever form, had on his disciples. They adopted very different values...: that they should love God and love one another. Period. They spent much time in worship, prayer, and study. And the rest of their time they helped one another with whatever physical needs were most pressing on the lowliest persons in the Church.

In short, they renounced the values of the world. The rest of the world valued power—power to control others, to command one’s environment to conform to one’s wishes. Power..., frequently in the form of the accumulation of wealth, was the main motivator for those outside of the Christian Church. But Christians loved one another, and you can’t have it both ways—either power is first, or... love is first.

A great example of this was the Antonine plague that devastated the Roman Empire about a hundred years after the gospels were written, when the Church was still very young and marginal. This was a plague of smallpox or measles, sometimes referred to as Galen’s plague because Galen was the top physician in the Roman Empire at the time.

Galen and his contemporary historians recorded much about the plague. The pagans would assume that a person who contracted plague must be accursed by the gods, and therefore should be shunned. To come in contact with someone accursed, would risk

bringing that curse down upon oneself. So, pagans would send their sick family members out into the streets to die alone, or to be beaten to death by those who feared them. Galen, the renowned physician, fled to the countryside, to avoid contact with the sick—although he didn't admit that that was his reason....

Meanwhile the Christians, who were perhaps one or two percent of the population at the time, took a very different approach. Jesus had taught them to pray for the sick, to heal those who were hurting. If Jesus cared for the sick, then, clearly, sickness was not a curse from God. Jesus also had taught them not to fear death, because there were values far more important than simply to continue living in this life. And so, Christians would care for their sick, giving them water and food, providing them basic hygiene services, blankets when they were cold and fans when they were hot. They not only cared for other Christians, but they also sometimes cared for non-Christians who expressed some marginal interest in the Church....

Well, guess what??? It's true that some of the Christians who volunteered to nurse the sick became sick themselves. And some of them died. They were celebrated as holy martyrs, not victims of a divine curse. But the bottom line is that something like a third of the total pagan population died, while only about ten percent of the Christians died. And the pagans noticed this difference. And the Christian Church grew rapidly after the plague.

Now you might say that there are perfectly good scientific reasons for all of this—God had nothing to do with it.... Is this just another boring, ordinary, idle tale? Or is this a part of a pattern that is hard to see, but extraordinarily significant? Is this just one stone within a mosaic, so that if we looked at all the stones together, they would reveal something divine???

As a former Chemical Engineer, I once studied atoms and their chemical properties. Atoms can't do much on their own. It's only by forming relationships with neighboring atoms that the combined effect of those relationships can become interesting. And the way that atoms form relationships is by sharing electrons, or, for you lay folks out there, they share some of their intrinsic energy, with other atoms. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the pure atoms out there are violently, explosively, unstable until they are able to share some of their intrinsic energy with other atoms. Only in mutual cooperation with others are they able to exist in some form of "peace."

Something about the most basic configuration of the universe, at the most fundamental level, seems to favor cooperation, mutuality, over isolation and greed....

Or, consider the trees. Most of the trees on this planet are designed to grow in groves. They do well in forests where their roots can intertwine and they can support one another from the wind. A tree out in a field all alone has a very strong chance of being toppled by wind or by lightning. Some trees send chemical signals through their roots to one another, warning distant trees of the approach of certain pests, so that even as one tree dies from some bug, the trees half a mile away increase their chemical resistance to precisely that type of pest.

Because, something about the most basic configuration of the universe seems to favor cooperation, mutuality, over isolation and greed.

In the Church, ever since its beginning, a major part of worship has been the singing of choirs. In fact, in Biblical depictions of Heaven, you will frequently find choirs as prominent features. I'm hoping there's also volleyball for us non-musical types, but I can't really comment on that just yet..... But, imagine a bell choir with just one bell.... Choirs lift our souls to God precisely because choirs can make music that no individual can make. And because cooperation and mutuality are the values that God most prizes.

Are you a part of this mosaic? And if you are, are you aware of your part? How do you live out Easter values in your life? Do you renounce the ways of the world—the values of power and greed? Do you seek mutuality, loving God and loving your neighbor????

When our Carers group sends donations to Interfaith House, or when the Night Ministry brings food to downtown Chicago, do these volunteers add to their own power or greed? When retired folks volunteer as Sunday School shepherds, though their own kids are long since through the program, does this conform with the values of this world? When the deacons spend many extra hours here on Easter Sunday just so that Communion can be provided for you for both services, do they receive any worldly benefit for their time?

I could go on and on.... Is there evidence that the Spirit of the Living Christ is alive and well among us today? Yes, there is powerful evidence, but only if you have eyes to perceive it.

But let us speculate, as a plausible theory, that the pattern we find in the atoms, in the trees, in the actions of Christians throughout

history, the pattern where mutuality and love is avored over self-centeredness and greed—let us speculate that this pattern exists... because it was designed that way. Let us assume that there is a Creator of this universe and that all of these stones in the mosaic are more than just coincidence. Then, if there is a Creator whose central characteristic is love, whose central call is for us to love one another..., then wouldn't it make sense that such a Creator would take an especial interest in someone like Jesus who taught us to love one another as our highest calling, and who showed us what such a life would look like in its ideal form???

And if it's not too much of a stretch to suggest that the God who IS love would be particularly drawn to a person such as Jesus, then, would it not also make sense that the relationship between God and Jesus would be so precious to God... that God would want to preserve that relationship in some lasting form???? In other words, doesn't every single atom in the universe proclaim that God would raise Jesus from the dead? At least, for those with ears that hear.....

Of course, it may all be an idle tale... that has somehow mysteriously survived all these millennia, despite not saying anything particularly creative or unique. Maybe... it's just a fun story, all about chocolate bunnies and plastic eggs—a fun, idle tale.... Or, perhaps it is the good news of the gospel. You decide.... Either way, Happy Easter.

Amen.