

“In Ten Words or Less”
Luke 24:1-12
Easter Sunday
Sermon by Jan Edmiston
Fairlington Presbyterian Church

It was sunrise.

Of the four versions of the first Easter, all begin early in the morning, and all of them cut to the chase, except for this one – Luke’s version – which slowly unfolds like a flower.

It even **starts with a conjunction** as if we’re starting in the middle of the story. The active characters are only identified as “they” and we don’t know who “they” are, but everything is happening *around* them and *to* them:

- they came to the tomb
- they found the stone rolled away
- they did not find the body
- they were perplexed
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And then finally we discover that “they” are women – but *what* women and *how many* women we don’t know until a few lines later.

The “men” in this story are angels – dazzling angels – who review what Jesus said about being crucified and rising in three days.

And then finally, the women are identified. Or at least three of them are identified. They are:

- *Mary Magdalene* from whom Jesus had exorcised seven demons¹
- *Joanna* who was married to a member of King Herod’s staff²
- *Mary the mother of James* – meaning “James the younger and Joses,” the wife of an unknown man called Clopas,³
- And at least two other unnamed women.⁴

¹ See Luke 8:2. There is no reason to believe Mary Magdalene was a prostitute as popular tradition often teaches. Some believe she was the woman in Luke 3:7:36-50, but there is no evidence to support this.

² Joanna was married to Chuza, Herod’s steward according to Luke 8:3. This would be King Herod Antipas son of Herod the Great.

³ This Mary is mentioned in Mark 15:40 as one included in the group of women watching the crucifixion “from a distance.” In Mark 16:1 they return to the tomb to bring spices, as in Luke’s version. According to John 19:25, she was probably married to Clopas.

⁴ “the other women with them” (vs. 10) implies that there was more than one but how many more we don’t know.

Luke's gospel says that while the 12 Disciples traveled with Jesus when he went from town to town teaching, Mary Magdalene and Joanna traveled with them too, along with several other women, and we are told that they "provided for" Jesus out of their own resources.⁵

These women watched the crucifixion.⁶ And then they came back the next day to finish preparing the body because his burial had been arranged so quickly, there hadn't been sufficient time to complete the task.

But, of course, we know the story well by now: they found the tomb empty and the body of Jesus was gone.

It sounds like they believed that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. But the men didn't believe them. It was "an idle tale."

As I've mentioned on previous Easters, the testimony of a sane adult women was given less credence in those days than the testimony of a mentally retarded teen-aged boy.

Peter wanted to believe them – or at least he ran to go see the empty tomb for himself. But we don't really know what he thought of all this. He was amazed but he simply went home afterwards.

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This is the most crucial story of the Christian faith, but according to Luke the morning ends with nobody seeing the risen Christ, nobody believing the women, and nobody really knowing what to do next.

How can a story with such a small punch be expected to inspire the masses on this Easter Sunday?

There has to be something more. There has to be a personal "catch," a personal connection.

For Mary Magdalene, we could say that Jesus gave her her life back. In those days, diseases like epilepsy and bipolar disorder and depression were all considered demons. (There are plenty of victims of these diseases today who would also attest to their demonic sides.) If Jesus healed her of seven demons, we can only imagine what her life had been like before he healed her. She would have been unspeakably grateful to this man who had given her her life back.

⁵ See Luke 8:3

⁶ They were close to the cross according to John 19:25. But they watched from a distance according to Mark 15:40.

And how interesting that Joanna was there. As the wife of Herod's steward, she would have been privy to the inner workings of Herod's household, and while many would clamor for this kind of royal connection, clearly this rabbi from Nazareth meant more to her than the son of Herod the Great. Maybe she had seen the king's cruelty or weakness firsthand and there was no comparison to the love and strength of Jesus.

And we have come this morning, perhaps because we have a personal connection to this rabbi from Nazareth:

- Maybe Jesus gave some of us our lives back. Maybe we have experienced something that healed us.
- Or maybe, if we've found ourselves close to the halls of power and been quite unimpressed if not hugely disappointed, then maybe we've found in Jesus something real.
- Or . . . maybe we've come today because we are searching for something real, something that will transform our pain.
- OR . . . maybe we've come because that's what you do on Easter – you put on your Sunday best and head out to church. You dye eggs and sing “Christ the LORD is Risen Today!” and then go out for brunch.

All of those are certainly legitimate reasons for us to find ourselves here on this beautiful day. **But I share with you today a challenge that has everything to do with *why we are here this morning.***⁷

IMAGINE.

Tonight you will receive a phone call from your neighbor who is panic-stricken. He is not a very religious person, but he noticed today that you went to church so he assumes you are at least a vaguely spiritual person. Maybe he's seen you head out to church every Sunday, or maybe he happened to notice you heading out today.

But no matter. “In a rush of words” he tells you that his wife is on the other line with their daughter who is off at college and she is having a crisis. She is depressed and crushed about life and she wants to end her life. Yes, there is counseling at her college and yes, there is even a suicide hotline, but before you can get from this moment to that moment, this neighbor needs you. He needs to keep his daughter alive, to give her enough hope to hang in there until help can come. But ***he doesn't have any idea what to say.***

From what he has seen, you have some depth, some spiritual sense. Surely you have a message that can keep her alive for the next few hours until help can come. Surely you – a religious person – could tell her why there is hope.

⁷ This “challenge” is adapted from the article “What Is Your Core Message” by Tom Bandy of Easum and Bandy Associates.

So there you are. All you wanted to do was watch “Desperate Housewives” tonight, but instead you are called to help a truly desperate person. *What would you do?*

One choice might be: **“Let me get you the phone number of our minister!”** Not bad, but the minister is actually here at the church building for Holy Grounds and, even if you can reach her, pastors don’t have a lot of credibility these days what with news reports about church scandals and pastors who are completely fake.

Choice #2: **“Let me get you the number of my own therapist!”** You show your neighbor that your *real* salvation is in the process of psychological analysis. Unfortunately, there isn’t enough time to establish a relationship that might help in such a short time.

Choice #3: **“Sing ‘Jesus loves me this I know’,”** to this young woman. Offer some trite quotations. Recite that “Footprints” story to her. The problem with any of these ideas is that “trite sayings do not inspire confidence.” And they seem like quick solutions to get you off the phone fast.

Choice #4: **Tell her that suicide is a sin anyway, so she can’t even think about that.** Ask her what she has done to get herself into this desperate situation. Remind her that she sounds spiritually weak and while you’re at it, remind the parents that they must not have done a good job raising their daughter. Tell her you will pray for her and her family, and then head off to bed with a clear conscience.

The problem with this idea is . . .
I don’t even have to tell you the problem with that idea.

Choice #5: **Tell her the Good News that has saved your own life.** (Okay – this is going to take some forethought.)

With urgency and authenticity and genuine compassion for this young woman, tell her why *you* have hope for tomorrow. “Skip the long story and cut to the chase.” What I would say is not the same as what you might say. Because my story is not the same as your story.

But it is my hope that – in ten words or less – you can give her your core message of hope.

These could have been Mary Magdalene’s words: **There is someone who can take this pain from you.**

Or Joanna’s words: **I know what it’s like to be disappointed. But I’m telling you, there is hope. The God I believe in knows what it’s like to be betrayed.**
(Okay that’s more than ten words, but you get the idea.)

If someone asks you today: ***“Why should I go on living?”*** what would you say? What personal experience do you have that captures your own hope, your own faith in the future, your own basis for living.

And would it help save someone else’s life?

It doesn’t have to be dramatic or church-y or theologically sophisticated. It could be as simple as this:

I believe that even if nobody else in the world gets you, that God gets you because God knows you better than anyone and God loves you so much. I know this to be true.

OR

I believe that nothing is as important right now than the fact that you are loved more than you can begin to imagine and while you cannot see it this minute, I know with everything in me that you were made for something bigger and better than this moment. It’s impossible to believe right now, but I’m telling you that resurrection is possible. Hang on and I promise you that the morning will be different.

Even Jesus said, “It is finished” when he died. He could have meant, “God’s big plan for the salvation of the world is now complete in my death,” but what makes more sense is that Jesus – betrayed by all his friends, tortured, humiliated – reminds us that even when we think life is *over*, there is still more to come. It is holy and mysterious and beyond our wildest imagination.

The call in the night is not a farfetched idea.

Sometime, somebody is going to call us and we should spend a little time pondering – now – how we will respond. What is our clear conviction about life and hope and resurrection? What kind of God do we believe in?

The God I believe in knows what it’s like even to lose a child. It doesn’t take away the pain. But it helps to have someone sit in that pain with us, until the morning.

It was still dark when the women came to the tomb. Their hopes were shattered. Their faith was shaken. And yet they had experienced something, they had seen something in Jesus that attracted them. It was his sincere concern. It was a faith tested by fire. It was a peace that endured in spite of human cruelty. Because Jesus knew that no matter what, there would be life.

Because God is bigger than death. God is bigger than the death of the body. God is bigger than the death of the spirit. God is bigger than the death of relationships. The death of family expectations. The death of future dreams we’ve created for ourselves.

God is bigger than the worst that we can imagine. This is core message of Easter.

Because Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

