

Easter Sunday 2022

April 17<sup>th</sup>

Luke 24:1-12

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

North Decatur 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.

So many things in this Easter story that I want to make sure you see.

First, I love how Luke says it takes place at “early dawn.” One translation calls it “deep dawn.” I don’t know how many of you are up at early dawn—and if you are, you’re probably grumpy about it and not watching the miracle unfolding. But there is a moment, every single morning, when night yields to day. There is a moment when, in the slow creep of the earth’s inexorable rotation, the darkness is pushed back, inch by inch, particle by particle. In early dawn, there is just enough light peeking around the curvature of the earth to reveal what darkness has hidden. The first thing you need to know is that Easter takes place at early dawn.

The spices. Fragrant. You can almost smell them if you wanted. These spices are used to cover the stench of a body’s decay; perhaps even to hasten that unseemly decay. The spices represent our best effort at dealing with the indignity of death; they cover it with beauty. The women bring the spices to honor what little is left of their beloved friend, even after his spirit has gone away. They carry fragrant spices.

These women have listened to Jesus and followed him and been seen and heard and cared for by Jesus. They loved him. They go to his tomb with spices at deep dawn. What they see at Jesus’ tomb changes *everything*. There is no corpse. They see two men in dazzling clothes. They hear, “Jesus is risen.” And they remembered. And then Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary (James’ mother) went back to the male disciples to tell them what they had seen and heard. And the disciples... were unmoved! To them, the idea that Jesus was risen from the dead sounded like an “idle tale.” The women seemed to them like unreliable witnesses.

Unreliable witnesses telling idle tales that take place at deep dawn that controvert the fact of death.

Throughout Lent, we have been telling a story. A grand, powerful, beautiful story about human life. Our story says that we are created by God in love. God makes you *by love and for love*. God makes you good and makes you *for* good. Nothing ever changes that truth. It is our original blessing.

Yet, amid this goodness, sin creeps in. It *does*. Sin is any thing you and I do to deny love. We reject love; we do. We choose less than love. And these decisions have consequences: we feel the effects of sin. It's a weight on our back, it leaves a stain, it's like a debt we owe, we miss the mark.

But because God is God and God is love, we know that God comes to us when we sin—again and again and again, with grace upon grace upon grace. God showers you with grace—with unmerited love. God's solution for sin is grace—it's not revenge, not anger, or punishment, not avoidance, not denial. God's answer to sin is “I love you,” “I care for you,” “I've got you,” “I forgive you.” This love, when we receive it, it lifts the weight, it washes away the stain, it pays the debt, it gives us every chance to step up again and aim for the mark. God's grace whispers to you when you sin; it reminds you *who you are and what you are for*.

For crying out loud, I even made you talk to your hand with a sock and eyeballs on it, pretending it was your sin. I wanted you to practice how God's grace disarms and transforms your relationship with sin. God speaks softly, but this grace is relentless and resourceful and tough; grace will do anything, go anywhere—even to hell, to win you back to the way of love. Nowhere do we know God's grace better than in the person of Jesus.

This past week, Holy Week, the story we share is a hard one. It's a story in which sin overwhelms grace and defeats it. Jesus comes up on a donkey into Jerusalem where he is swept up by sin. By Judas' betrayal. By jealousy among the leaders. By fear in his friends. By the cruelty of the empire. Sin takes grace and nails it to a cross, and taunts grace and laughs at grace and tell grace how weak it is, and sin leaves grace to die.

This story we tell never fails to alarm me because of how real it is. It's never hard to look around at our world and see that sin continues to punish grace.

It's most plain in war—the utter horror. An awful human being sends his army to invade a sovereign nation on a delusional quest to Make Russia Great Again. The suffering of the Ukrainian people is wrenching. Sin keeps punishing grace.

Sin punishes grace in our failure to love and protect each other during the pandemic. Instead of doing whatever we can, whatever is necessary to keep each other healthy and alive, we're fighting with each other over whether I need to get a shot or wear a mask. 986,000 people are dead. Sin keeps punishing grace.

The lack of affordable housing. Wealth inequality. White nationalism. Beating up on trans kids and their families. The abandonment of poor communities. Trading democracy for autocracy.

The death of the planet. Every day you and I, in the rhythm of our lives, are pulled from the way of love by those who try to tell us other stories. They want to tell you stories about prioritizing your own self-interest, national glory, about using power to win at any cost. It is not hard to look and see sin laughing at grace as it hangs up to die... and to wonder if those stories aren't true.

On Easter morning, what we see and hear in this tale is that God comes to us. God finds us. Rolls away stones. Gets by our locked doors. Gets around our cynicism and disarms our fear. Like God did at the shore of the Red Sea, God's grace breaks in to transform this world in the most surprising, confounding ways. God's love has ways beyond what you can imagine. God's love for you and I and creation is the most powerful force in all the world. God's grace in Jesus Christ cannot be kept in a tomb—nothing ever separates us from that love.

Do you believe that grace will carry the day? It's OK if you still wonder. If you still have your doubts.

My understanding of the Easter revelation was forever altered by my friend Rick Spalding, who is now honorably retired from our preaching group. Rick wrote one year about Luke's Easter story. He says that it's no accident that Luke sets Easter at early dawn. There's a moment, every day, when "the night infinitesimally turns itself revealing some startling new side of its nature, one atom at a time." Rick says, "I suspect that most people approach Easter through something like 'deep dawn' – it's that time when you can't be absolutely sure (yet) what it is you're seeing.... I have a feeling that, Easter steals upon us atom by atom, not as a burst of celestial trumpets, but an infinitesimal turning of our nature towards its wholeness, this secret enacted over our heads and within our very tissues every day."

Over your head, within your very tissues, there is a story that is unfolding. Some people think it's an idle tale, told by fools, by the weak, by wishful thinkers and unreliable narrators. But we know this story. Grace wins. Love reigns. Christ is Risen.

---