

**Easter Sunday – April 8, 2007**  
**Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV**  
**Luke 24:1-10 – The Women at the Tomb**

***The Rev. Kent Higgins***

Those of you who were here on Maundy Thursday heard the beginning of a conversation involving midrash, which is a concept in Jewish Scripture study which explores the language of Scripture on at least two levels. One is, what does the language actually say, that is, what is the literal reading of the text, which is probably also the same as saying “what did this mean to the people to whom it was originally addressed?” The other is a more nuanced interpretation which involves the current-day reader and his or her experiences-with and reactions-to the text in trying to discern the meaning of the passage for our lives today.

Midrash is, I think, a sensible way to read Scripture. It allows a passage written long ago and far away to have meaning for us today, in ways its original authors may never have imagined, but which are ways that make sense as God speaks to our hearts through the words of the Bible. And do understand that Jewish scholars accepted all of the Scripture as divinely inspired as the word of God.

But it is important to understand that if one is interpreting Scripture through the techniques of midrash, then it is not critical that all of the details of the story be literally true. The point becomes, what can be understood from Scripture depends on how God speaks to the you and me. The issue that arises with it from time to time these days is that, faced with a difficult-to-accept story in the Bible, a modern reader can claim it was written to be interpreted, that is, it does not have to be literally true.

In this context, there is a question I’d like you to ponder. Don’t worry – there will be no test or show of hands! The question is, do you believe that Jesus really lived on this earth as a human being, died on the cross, was buried, and then rose again from the dead on the third day, after which he was seen by many witnesses before he ascended into heaven? I do not mean this to be a “trick” question – I’m quite serious about it. And the reason I ask it has to do with my own faith journey.

My story wanders a bit. Sometimes it reminds me of the roads of West Virginia – twisting and turning and sometimes downright treacherous. So this sermon may wander a bit as well. Just relax and go along for the ride...

Let's go to the question I'm asking you: did Jesus really rise from the dead? Luke's Gospel deals with the resurrection, not surprisingly for Easter Sunday. Luke lays out the facts for your consideration. He tells you when the event happened – "On the first day of the week, at early dawn." He tells you who is involved – Mary Magdalene, she of Da Vinci Code fame – let's see if we can ignore that.

Joanna is mentioned only in Luke, and indeed may be one of his sources for his Gospel and for the Acts of the Apostles. According to *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, "Joanna is also notable because she was the wife of ... one of Herod Antipas' estate managers. Thus, she is an example of how the gospel affected people connected with the established authorities, people who were financially comfortable compared to most of the Galilean populace. We are led to believe that this rather prominent woman left her family and home to travel with Jesus and to provide assistance for his itinerant band of disciples."<sup>1</sup> Not unlike the funding model so familiar to The Episcopal Church.

And there were others there – Luke testifies to all of this, laying out his case so that you may believe what you read and hear. These are demonstrably real people. And then there are supernatural beings – two men dressed in "dazzling white" – they who deliver Luke's real message, which is "he has risen, just as he told you he would." And the body of Jesus, which the women had prepared for burial and seen lying in the tomb, is gone.

So again the question. Do you believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead? If your answer is "No," or "I'm not sure," you're in good company, for it appears that the apostles reacted pretty much that way when the women brought their news of the empty tomb.

Elsewhere in Scripture, we read of appearances of the risen Lord, including the famous one involving "Doubting Thomas" who simply would not believe until he saw and touched the wounds in Jesus' body. It's pretty clear that the apostles, the men who had been closest to Jesus

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<sup>1</sup>Freedman, David Noel: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York : Doubleday, 1996, c1992, S. 3:855

in life, were completely devastated by his death. They in fact feared for their own lives, and so hid in a locked room.

I have to tell you that I understand their confusion.

I have no trouble believing that there was a man named Jesus, who was a popular Jewish teacher who lived and worked in Israel during Roman times. I have no trouble believing that he was crucified by the Romans, who were put up to it by jealous religious leaders. I have no trouble at all believing that, once nailed to the cross, Jesus died there, and I know it was a horribly painful death. All that I can accept from the testimony of the Bible. It is believable to a person who lives in the twenty-first century.

But for a crucified man, who was dead and buried, to be alive again, is a stretch for any of us in this day and time. And when someone comes along and explains midrash, and tells you this story doesn't have to be literally true, that this could be "just the way they did things then," a part of me breathes a sigh of relief. This unbelievable story doesn't have to be really true. And that's the danger of this kind of reading, for if the resurrection is not true, what are we doing here? What are you doing sitting here on a Sunday morning?

I believe it is true. I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead.

I'm not going to try to prove it to you. I don't think I can prove it to you. I'm going to advance two reasons that I believe as I do. One is more intellectual, while the other is more emotional. Neither represents the type of proof we have come to expect in our modern world. I do not believe we will find such proof or that it is necessary. All I can do is tell you what my faith tells me.

Understand that knowledge does not lead to faith, but rather faith leads to knowledge. There is no need for faith in the presence of real knowledge, just as there is no substitute for faith in the absence of knowledge.

As we humans grow up and learn our way in the world, we faithfully trust what our parents and other adults tell us until they are proven wrong, or until we can no longer overcome the pressures of our own experiences and feelings. Many of us at one time believed in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus, because some well-intentioned adult told us it was true. Probably most of us have moved from faith in Santa Claus to knowledge of paying the Christmas bills.

In my youth, I always assumed there was a creator of the world around me. There was a part of me, mostly intellectual, that watched the sun rise, looked at the moon through a telescope, realized that when my mind told my arm to scratch my ear, it did it. I realized that no matter how much I learned about the world in which I lived, there would always be more to learn, and there would always be things I would never learn. For example, no matter what science teachers told me about luminescence – that it is the way neon signs light up, or computer screens glow, or fireflies make that amazing light – I realized that I did not really understand it – especially not the fireflies!

So for me, a God who created all this was obvious. I believed that God cared for me as part of his creation. Not as some special part – just an ordinary part, but valued nonetheless.

As I was growing up, nobody ever said that I needed to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, even though those were the words we said every week in church. And so I went along for rather a long time, knowing there was this man Jesus, but not spending a lot of time dealing with it. Likewise, the Holy Spirit was known but undefined.

At some point, and still on the intellectual side of my being, I began to explore what is called “the quest for the historical Jesus.” It’s studying the available sources to try to find out what Jesus the person was really like. It didn’t take me very long to realize that there simply is not enough reliable material to do much along those lines.

But I did come to know more about the apostles, the original twelve, reduced to eleven with the elimination of Judas, restored to twelve with the selection of Mathias.

And then one Lenten season, I experienced in my imagination something of the pain that Jesus felt on the cross. Someone’s sermon – I do not remember whose, but it is far better to remember the sermon than to remember the preacher – someone’s sermon was sufficiently effective that I moved away from intellect and into emotion. By then I’d had the experience of spending some time in Vietnam and being at times scared for my own life, and so I could understand why the followers of Jesus hid themselves, fearing their own lives would be lost as his had been.

I felt the despair they all must have felt when, not having understood what Jesus had been telling them, they felt lost and abandoned and alone. The man for whom they had given up everything was dead.

In my own spiritual journey, belief in Easter came from the story we will tell over the coming fifty days. And that brings in the Holy Spirit. For you see, the apostles, that rag tag band of misfits, who time after time failed to comprehend what they were being told, this crowd all of a sudden was energized in a way that changed the world.

I did not see the resurrected Jesus in person, but I came to believe that they had, for I simply had no other way to explain what happened. Faith grew as I learned more and more about the early Church. The Gospel – the “good news” – spread across the Roman Empire, the same entity that had crucified Jesus, and I simply could not explain it with anything other than the same amazement with which I had watched fireflies on a summer night or looked at the stars in the sky.

I concluded the apostles and other witnesses could not have made this up and have it hold together all these years. The Church is very far indeed from being a perfect institution, but it has done wonderful things, all in the name of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, the King of kings. It could not have done them without the grace of God. We’re just not that good. But more than that, I believe, deep in my heart, that the resurrection is real.

I don’t know where you are in your own faith journey. Everyone is somewhere. Probably no two of us are in exactly the same place. You may not yet fully believe, or you may have faith so much greater than mine that I am a little child by comparison. Yet here we all are, gathered in this building to worship God. It is God’s grace that brings us here, not our own merits. It is the sacrifice of Jesus that earns our place at the table. And it is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that empowers us to tell others our story and to invite them to be our companions on the way.

I thank God for each of you, and for the witness you bear in your lives and in this place, and I thank you for sharing your journey with me. We have received the faith of those who have gone before us. It is a precious gift, one which we are called to give away to those who need it.

There is a whole world which needs for us to bring the love of Jesus to it. I pray that we all take the joy of Easter out into that world to show it to others, in some way more tangible than a bumper sticker, so they may have faith that Jesus Christ lives. Rejoice that Jesus Christ is risen, death has been overcome, and our salvation is assured! *Amen.*