

Believing

Luke 23:54-24:12

Cradock Presbyterian Church

Easter March 31, 2013

All of us live according to a set of “facts,” things we *know* are true. Like gravity! You *know* that if you walk to the edge of the roof and then keep going, you’re going to start heading to the ground, whether you want to or not. You *know* that if something’s on fire, you’ll get burned if you touch it. You also know that if you actually *see* something, and interact with it in some way, by touching it, or talking with it or hearing it talk, if you actually *see* it, it’s probably a person, it’s probably real.

There are other “facts” we live by, that really aren’t facts, but come under the heading of “belief.” We strongly believe that we can trust certain people in our lives – wives or husbands, mothers or fathers, for example. We’re certain that *our* country, America, is the best place on earth. We’re absolutely confident that if we work hard, we’ll be successful. These aren’t *facts* like gravity and heat, but past experience with these things has strengthened our believing. We can’t imagine not trusting family. We can’t imagine America is NOT the best place in the world. We can’t stop believing that hard work always equals success.

Those women who went to the tomb that day were having a hard time believing. So were the disciples, but this story isn’t about them, it’s about these faithful women. It’s funny, how the word in the original language for “believe” also means “have faith in,” “trust,” and even, in some instances, “be loyal to.” In the case of these women, we get a sense of all of that. Their taking care of the body of Jesus was about “being loyal to.” Their decision to do it, even given the circumstances of Jesus’ death, is a case of having trust in God, that no harm would come to them. “Having faith” enters the picture, too, because they took it on faith that the body of Jesus, which they had seen the day before, would still be right there in that tomb.

They probably believed it all strongly enough that it worked as fact for them. Oh, and one more thing they believed in: when you die, you're dead, and that's that. Maybe, some day, God might take you up to heaven. But the old Jewish beliefs were nothing like what Jesus had been telling them. He'd been saying *all this stuff* about dying, and being raised from the dead. He talked about *he himself* rising from the dead on the third day after his death. Now that goes against the laws of nature! That's like walking out to that edge, and keeping on going right out into space! It just doesn't happen. The women knew all that Jesus had said. Even though women were second-rate people in Jesus' day, these women had been following him around throughout his ministry. They knew his teachings, they'd heard them over and over again. You know, this business about resurrection, it was just too much to believe. It was too good to be true, so it *couldn't* be true. That's what they were thinking as they headed to the tomb that early Easter morning. We know, because as we read all of the Gospel accounts of their trip to adorn the body, NONE of them mentions the women as looking forward to the resurrection. Their conversations, as we hear them, concern who will roll away the rock sealing off the tomb. You know what's going on here – they believe so strongly that Jesus is dead, they can't imagine anything other than his body, in that tomb, just like they left it.

Well wouldn't you know it? – things didn't turn out like they believed they would. I suppose they were both relieved and alarmed when they got there and saw the stone rolled back. Relieved, because a problem was gone, but alarmed, too, because a rolled-back stone you don't expect might just mean somebody came and robbed the grave, or did something vile to the body. They didn't know what to make of this; the confusion got even worse when they went inside, and *there was no body*. No sign of him! The NRSV translates that they were

“perplexed” about this; the word in the original language means “having no way out.” It’s clear what this means in modern terms: there’s *no escaping* the problem, and no way to solve it, either. There’s *no way* to escape the dilemma. It’s as if they’re trapped; that’s the meaning that Luke is trying to convey. It’s an inescapable problem! You and I would know what to do. We’d get on our cell phone, call the police to report the missing body, and wait for them to come. Those first-century women didn’t have any idea what to do, no way to do much of anything, and lots of nervousness about what might happen next. I bet none of them ever experienced anything like this, a missing body.

And if they had never experienced a missing body, they certainly had never experienced what came next. Suddenly, there were two men with “dazzling” clothes in front of them. No, not fancy dressers! Angels. No doubt about it, angels. NOW it was time to get terrified! And as if the appearance of those angels wasn’t scary enough, what they said was – well, the complete changing of their world. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” they ask. What!?!? Are you saying – “He is not here but has risen.” The verb in the original language is actually in the passive, which makes it even stranger to them: not “he has risen” but more like “he has *been raised*.”

Oh. What?! We might be more sophisticated nowadays, but there are some basic things that are the same now as then. People just don’t rise up from the dead! Not in this world. That’s a pretty foundational belief! If what the angels have just said to them is right, then – But how can that be?

It all comes down to believing those closest to you, like family or spouse. The angels say, “Remember how he told you, back there in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?” It is to the women’s credit

that at this point, they remembered, and they DID believe. They rushed home, full of excitement, and told the disciples. But the disciples, who had not yet seen, could not believe. Too much of a world-changing thing for them! Except for one disciple. Peter went to the now-empty tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, [much like on the cover of your bulletin,] and he was, as the text puts it, “amazed.” The word in the original is much richer, much stronger. Peter was *stunned*; he was *startled*; he was *beside himself*. Peter just had his gravity taken away! But note this – the text never tells us that he *believed*. That would have to come later, when Jesus appeared to the disciples in the place where they were hiding.

The question I have for you this morning is this: Is the resurrection of Jesus your set of “facts” about the world? Like it became living fact for those women? Or, like Peter, and especially like the disciples who thought the women’s story was “an idle tale” – do you still need something more?

About half the time I struggle to write endings to sermons. I was struggling along with this one when it occurred to me why I was having so much trouble. *This story HAS no ending!* It has no ending because in Jesus Christ there is no ending, only eternal life. And it’s not just the story that has no ending: neither do we. Because Jesus Christ did the dying for us, we can live on forever, if we just believe.