



Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010 Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

Reading: Luke 24: 1-12

“No Idle Tale”

Some time ago, when Brian and I met to discuss the music for this morning’s service, it was a no brainer that we would ask the Gospel Choir to sing and that we would try and get a guest soloist to join them.

If there was ever a day to raise the roof off the church with shouts of hallelujah and songs of great joy, today is the day. Today in churches around the world, musicians are pulling out all the stops, offering up the finest hallelujah choruses the human voice can deliver.

That is, of course, because today is the day we celebrate hope, the day we are invited to embrace new life, the day we are reminded that we are stronger than we think and life is full of more possibility than we often imagine it to be. Today is the day we know God’s grace and healing. Today is the day we proclaim there is nothing that can overcome the power of love.

But the great irony of this day is that when we turn to our bibles and read the various versions of what happened that first Easter morning, we discover that there is not a single hallelujah to be found in any of the stories. Not a hoot or a holler or even just a plain old “Amen.”

In fact quite the opposite is true. In Mark’s version of the story the women who go to the tomb are alarmed. They flee from the tomb, “for terror and amazement has seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

In Matthew’s story the women do return home with great joy, but it’s still tempered with fear. So it’s unlikely they were singing Hallelujah because they would have been afraid that someone might have heard them.

John’s gospel tells of Mary clinging to the tomb despite having an encounter with the risen Christ. And in the reading we heard this morning, (Luke’s version) although the women go home and tell the eleven disciples he is risen, their news seems to fall on deaf ears – their words seemed to them an idle tale.

Believe me, there’s not a preacher in the world who can’t relate to these women who know what it’s like to preach a sermon while the people in the back pews are sawing logs.

It’s not a particularly strong start to a religion that has lasted for more than 2000 years.

For many people, the celebration of Easter is a time of great comfort. For those of us whose loved ones have died, for those of us who are facing the end of our lives, for all of us as we struggle with our immortality, the message of a resurrected life that extends beyond this life is reassuring.

But the first recipients of the good news of Easter weren’t really that preoccupied with what comes next after our life on earth has ended.

For the first hearers of the good news, the fear they needed to overcome was not their fear of death, it was their fear of life.

The problem wasn't that the sermon the women preached wasn't sufficiently engaging. The problem was the listeners were resistance to the message.

You see, if Jesus had indeed been broken free of his tomb to embrace new life, the implication was that they too might be broken free out of their tombs and called to embrace life.

If the same Spirit that was in Jesus was in them, as he had been telling them all along it was, and they had this power within them, then the fact that the tomb couldn't contain him and his Spirit meant that they too were going to have to stand up to the death-dealing powers of life and embrace a different way of being in the world.

And that scared them.

The thing about being entombed, which many of us are in one way or another, is that it's quite remarkable how easily our eyes adjust to the darkness of the tombs in which we dwell and therefore how hard it can be to believe in the light.

The power of fear is an incredibly strong force at work in our world.

It can keep those of us who are addicted enslaved to our drug of choice.

It can coop us up in dead-end jobs for years on end.

It can stop us from seeking the reconciliation that we long for and speaking the truth that sits on the tip of our tongues.

It can trap us in unhealthy relationships.

It can lock gays and lesbians and transgendered people in closets.

It can silence us from confessing our sins and from taking responsibility for our mistakes.

Fear keeps governments from taking risks and ministers from telling their congregations about things that are hard to hear.

It blocks us from having authentic relationships with our fellow human beings.

Because stepping out into new life so often means hurting the people who have been unintentional accomplices in our death dwelling ways, fear of losing those friends and family members can stop us dead in our tracks.

Fear can fool us into believing that the promise of new life is just an idle tale.

I find it curious in Luke's telling of the story of that first Easter morning that upon hearing the sermon the woman preach about the empty tomb – its only Peter who gets up and runs to the burial site to see for himself if the tale is really true.

I wonder if that's because Peter is the one in the story who is the most desperate to get out of his own tomb and catch a glimmer of freedom.

What could be worse than denying your best friend three times and then standing in silence while he is beaten and put to death? Wouldn't that be enough to count you among the walking dead?

And so I wonder if when Peter saw Jesus' grave clothes lying on the floor of the tomb, he wanted to tear off his own grave clothes and walk out of that tomb ready to embrace a new life, ready to leave his fear behind and say "yes" to life. Even if ultimately it took him a while to do that. Sometimes you have to be pretty desperate to actually grab onto life when it comes knocking on your door.

When the women came knocking on the disciples' door that first Easter morning the implication in the good news they shared was that they would never be the same again. For some, that made them scared, it even made them resistant – it caught their hallelujahs in the back of their throats.

It can take time for us to trust in life; time for us to allow ourselves to be pulled out of our tombs.

So perhaps the best news of that first Easter morning is not only that He is Risen – that new life is possible – but also that life is persistent – God is persistent -- even when we are resistant – waiting for us to walk away from our grave clothes, luring us to say yes to life that is abundant and freeing and peace-filled and real. Longing for us to trust and believe – that this really is no idle tale.