

AN IDLE TALE

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA
www.aidanvbva.net

Alleliua, the Lord is risen.
The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia.

We loudly proclaimed this truth just a few moments ago as we began this incredible service. However that is not how the disciples greet the words of the women as the return from the tomb.

To them these words seemed to be an idle tale. These words seemed to be nonsense in the NIV translation. In the Message translation the apostles thought they were making it up. The Greek word is *leros* (leros) from which we get the word delirious. Hold on to that thought while we step back and look at what Luke tells us about the story. The Luke story is the one that is usually used for the vigil or the early service in our current year C reading cycle, but I elected to use it this morning because of this verse and the nonsensical, delirious, made up, idle tale.

This passage begins as do most of the versions with women, doing women's work. They are preparing the dead for burial. Caring for Jesus to the last. At the end only the women are left except for Joseph of Arimathea who asks Pilate for the body and places him in his tomb.

The long wait to make the final preparations are over. I would think that they would be dreading what they would find. A body two days dead would not be pleasant, but they had to wait for the Sabbath to be over before they could do the final preparations.

The women are greeted not by a corpse, but by two men, who of course are angels. The angels remind them of Christ's many words and only then do they remember that Jesus had told them that this is exactly what would happen.

The word remember, literally means to put back together. It is the opposite if you will of dismember. The angels allow the women to remember Jesus' teaching and then to put new meaning and understanding to what he had said prior to the crucifixion. They run back with their new understanding of what is happening.

The problem come when the disciples think the women are telling an idle tale. Peter has to go run and see for himself because he does not believe the women. Some would say this was because of the Jewish tradition that would not admit a woman's testimony because it was not considered reliable.

One of the characters in this drama is Mary Magdalene, the woman who was cured of being possessed by 7 demons. One of the signs of demon possession would be wild or irrational

statements. Now she comes back and tells the others that Jesus is not in the tomb and that shining beings have told her he has been raised from the dead. So to a rational mind this most certainly would seem an idle tale.

Luke leaves out several important details that are found in the other gospels. No guards, no mention of a stone, but most surprising of all, NO JESUS! Literally and figuratively. Jesus is not there. Two angels are there, but no Jesus. Jesus does not make his first appearance until he meets the two disciples on road to Emmaus, where he is hidden from Cleopas' eyes until he breaks bread with them.

The women believe because the angel tells them. The angel allows them to remember, to put back together what Jesus had said in a way that allowed them to make meaning of what seemed meaningless and unbelievable.

Easter People are people of faith above and beyond everything else. We are people who believe in what many think is foolishness. Paul refers to being a fool for Christ.

Skeptics Christianity point out that the four gospel accounts of the resurrection are at odds. There truly is no way to harmonize them into one single account. Over the centuries the church has tried to do this, but we long ago gave up on that effort. So those who scoff at us say, "If your scriptures can't even get the most important event of your religion right, how can you believe any of it?"

Friday some of you walked the Stations of the Cross in Town Center. It was a powerful witness, but I was amused at the looks from the people in the outdoor seating areas that clearly wondered what in the world those crazy people were doing. When we got over by the Sandler Center there is a kiosk that advertises upcoming shows. There must be a motion sensor in it for as soon as we approached it started to show an ad along with a little video. The sound from the kiosk almost drowned out the readings that we were doing. What a metaphor for the collision of church and society today.

Now back to the verse that caught my attention. Peterson in the Message translation states, "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them kept telling these things to the apostles, but the apostles didn't believe a word of it, thought they were making it all up. Many today see this lack of consistency as proof that we are telling an idle tale. Even more look at what people who claim to be Christian do and how they act. They look at the teachings and then at how people behave and wonder if they take their religion seriously. It is like the T-shirt I saw that says, 'I love Jesus, it's some of his followers that make me crazy.'"

Since last Easter this has been a tough year for Christians. Between the wild comments made by some television evangelists, some news commentators and over the last week the re-emergence of the abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church many in the public are skeptical and getting more skeptical. More and more they look at what we believe as an idle tale or even worse that we are simply making all this up. The drumbeat of those who write

books attacking religion in general continue to sit atop the best seller list on the NY Times and much of the criticism is somewhat deserved.

The problem is people want hard proof of these events that defy all logic and all science. Bishop Spong in his lecture at Eastern Shore Church has just finished a book on the afterlife and in his research found that less than half of the American population actually believes in an afterlife. The vast majority want to believe, but when pushed they doubt. He said, "The majority want to believe in believing that there is an afterlife." In other words they hope for life eternal, but cannot wrap their human brains around the concept.

Well, there is no hard proof of the resurrection or the afterlife. There is only belief. This belief has sustained us for 2000 years. That is a pretty good track record for an idle tale. Our faith is based on so much more than an empty tomb. It is based first on the witness of these wonderful faithful women. Our faith is based on the experiences of first the disciples. Our faith is based on the witness of Christians throughout the centuries. These experiences are more often like those of Paul who encounters Jesus some years later on the road to Damascus.

This does little to answer those who want physical proof, but what we can and must do is preach the gospel in all ways. That is what our baptismal promises call on us to do. We are called to preach the gospel in word and example. We not only are called to do this, but promise to do this in the course of every baptism service. Christians world wide would have a much better standing in today's world if we lived into just this one baptismal promise. For the deeds that we do in Christ's name do more to proclaim the truth of his resurrection than anything we say. St. Francis was right when he told his monks, preach the gospel at all times, use words only when necessary.

So as you leave here this morning, know that your work as proclaimers of the gospel is just beginning. That the gospel you proclaim by word and example is not an idle tale, is not nonsense, but filled by the Spirit you may appear somewhat delirious.

So what we believe is far more important than why. I cannot explain in rational terms why I believe in a risen Lord, but I do. What I believe and how I am called to live I can state and I now invite you to stand and join me in reaffirming our faith in Christ and the promises of how we live out that faith. Even though the bulletin says the Nicene Creed, as I wrote this sermon Saturday afternoon, I decided that I would like to use the more ancient Apostles Creed and the promises as found in the Renewal of our Baptismal Vows on page 292 which is also appropriate for an Easter Service.