

## An Expansive Life

Sermon 139 | Easter Sunday at Greystone Baptist Church | April 17, 2022

Luke 24:1-12

My grandfather is a very convincing storyteller. His dry wit and very serious nature offer the perfect backdrop for any kind of tale he wants to tell. A strict disciplinarian, I can remember crossing him a few times as a young child and suffering the consequences that would prevent me from engaging in the same offense a second time. Perhaps it is because of this that when granddaddy told a story, my sisters and I all listened closely.

We listened and watched his eyes hidden behind his glasses. There was (and still is) a distinct little sparkle you can see when he's pulling your leg, telling an idle tale. He doesn't crack a smile, but if you watch closely enough, the sparkle will give it away.

I can remember so many of the stories he told us, some true and some just to see if we'd believe him. Stories about deer love letters hidden away in the woods, one I didn't believe until I saw it with my own two eyes: imprints of one deer hoof on top of another. Stories about the boogie man who lived under my bed. This one I believed without any evidence supporting the claim at all. I guess it served a purpose, when I stayed at their house, I wouldn't dare get out of bed after they'd said goodnight and turned out the lights. Stories about how he fell in love with my Nana, Betty Scott, the first time he saw her working at the 5 and 10 cent store; and how she saved him from all the other beautiful women who were vying for his attention. (This one, he can't tell with a straight face).

There is one memorable tale that granddaddy told that has had a lasting impact on my life. It may be the only one with such a profound influence on my day to day habits and behaviors. I can remember where we were the evening he told the story. We were all gathered around the kitchen table at our house on Conastoga Drive. We moved away from that house when I was in first grade so I couldn't have been more than 6 years old. We were just beginning to share our meal that night and the blessing was over. I reached my hand up toward the salt and pepper shakers and Granddaddy said quickly and in his serious voice, "Don't you be using that pepper shaker. You know what'll happen if you eat that pepper."

I don't remember which shaker I was actually reaching for, but I remember my heart racing and I'm sure my eyes had widened to the size of quarters. "No," I said, "What will happen?!"

"It'll make hair grow on your chest."

Horrified I pulled my hand back, far, far, away from that pepper shaker. And while I know now this was just another idle tale, I still keep my distance from black pepper.

What is it that Sarah Lawrence professor, Joseph Campbell, used to say? ...*People forget facts, but they remember stories.*

Some would even say that stories are the most powerful shapers of our human experience. They shape the ways that we see the world. They provide a framework within which we can make sense of our experiences. They provide meaning and they help us find our place, our role in this world. Christians share a set of sacred stories, bound up in this book we call the *Bible*. We turn to it time and time again to search for wisdom, guidance, and meaning. And we can always find those things there, within the stories of our faith.

Jesus was a storyteller, and he situated his life within the greater story that God was telling through the people of Israel. He would often quote those stories, the scriptures written by the prophets to give his life and mission context and meaning. From the reading of Isaiah scroll in Luke chapter 4 Jesus places himself firmly within the storied tradition of the Hebrew prophets; and as *his* story unfolds, Jesus continues to weave together his ministry with the prophetic expectations of the Messiah, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and liberating the oppressed. Jesus is the Savior of the World, the one about whom the stories are told, the one who – with his life – is writing the story of God incarnate, the one who foreshadows his own story saying, whoever wants to find his life must lose it... and then he spells it out for the disciples describing the horrible events that would unfold before the cross. But he also tells them that the cross wouldn't be the end of the story, that on the third day, he would rise.<sup>1</sup> But the disciples could not understand. Was Jesus telling them an idle tale?

Like sisters struggling to discern the look on grandfather's face as he tells a story that seems just outside the realm of possibility, the disciples are only certain about their uncertainty.

After witnessing the brutality of the cross, surely the possibility of this tale being true had entered their minds. At least as a distant hope. The women rose early in the morning and carried their burial spices to the tomb. The others stayed back – idle – probably worried, confused, and still in shock. Though the women were the first to the tomb, they did arrive there prepared to anoint a lifeless body. It seems they are all still trying to sort things out, standing in a liminal space between hope and reality.

When they arrive, though, they are greeted by two men in “dazzling apparel,” that's Luke's way of letting us know these are angelic figures, a narrative clue that God is up to something here. And the words that come out of their mouths are simply this: *Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you this would happen, Remember how he told you he would be handed over, he would be crucified, and on the third day he would rise? Remember!*

And the story, as Luke tells it says: *They remembered.*

The famous preaching professor, Fred Craddock, says that this “remembering” marks a turning point in Luke's Gospel, as it becomes the formula for a new community of believers. “...Remembering is often the activating of the power of recognition.” It is in the remembering that the women leap into action, leaving behind their burial spices and

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:31-34

running back to tell the others the good news. Remembering is what changes the story from idle tale to expanding narrative. Remembering is the key to connecting the promises made by ancient prophets to the living hope embodied by the resurrected Christ.

*Remember what he told you...*

Of course the resurrection of the disciples wasn't quick, easy, or even straightforward. Sure, the women remembered as soon as they met the figures dressed in dazzling clothes; but when they returned to tell the others, they were met with skepticism and doubt. In fact, the apostles believed their words to be an idle tale.

They just needed to see it for themselves.

And they would, the next day on the road to Emmaus, or rather we should say they would recognize Jesus not on the road, but as he gathered them in to share a meal. It wasn't until he broke the bread, as he had done at the Passover, when they recognized him and remembered. In their remembering they began to come alive again, saying aloud that ancient Easter proclamation: *Christ is risen, indeed!* As they remembered the meaning and purpose and calling that they had claimed just a week before – before the cross had stolen their courage – all of that came rushing back as the disciples, once again, were enlivened and animated with the Good News, the story of God's love unfolding in the resurrection of Jesus. They just needed to remember so that they could once again see and *become* the body of Christ in this world.

No, the story the women told was not an idle tale, it was not a joke or a mean prank. It was the truth! Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

But the story didn't end there. No, and it still isn't over.

The truth, the Easter proclamation, the reality of the resurrection is still the same. Christ is risen. Christ is alive. Christ is alive in you and in me, in the church which is called the body of Christ – we are all invited to come, to see, to remember that the tomb is empty, that death is impermanent, and that resurrection *is* not only possible but is *happening* now. It is no idle tale, you don't have to look for the sparkle in the eye giving way to the trick. There is no trick because this story is real, despite all evidence to the contrary. Christ is alive and we are all invited to remember.

Now, sometimes, especially on days like this one, the theological ideas presented can seem a little out of touch, a little inapplicable to our everyday lives. Yes, there are a lot of fancy words written down in serious books on the matter of resurrection. But it really is as simple as the words of the disciples: *The Lord has risen, indeed.* Meaning, though the future may look grim, though the past or present may be filled with struggle, grief, and loss, though the relationship feels a little rocky, though the challenges may seem insurmountable... in Christ, death is not the final word.

Meaning, there is always hope and there is always the possibility of resurrection.

There is always a bridge that can be built, there is always grace to mend the broken, there is always a new sprout pushing through the dry ground.

Two years ago we hoped that Easter would bring an end to the pandemic which was just five weeks old. Pastors and community leaders gathered making hopeful plans for in-person, indoors celebrations of resurrection – not only of Jesus, but of a life that we called “normal”. No one could know what the journey would hold, but we all hoped it would be over by Easter.

Though we couldn’t gather for that Easter, we held our services online and we worshipped in different ways, trying our best to hold onto hope and to look for signs of life in a world that more closely resembled the dark and closed tomb. Then last Easter, 13 months into the pandemic, with a little more hope in the air we gathered outdoors and did what we could to remember our Easter traditions. The flowering cross, the Lord’s Supper and a bold refrain of *Alleluias* poured from our lips as we remembered the story and the promise that death would not have the final word.

Now today, the third Easter since everything in our world changed, we gather again – still not quite like it used to be – but with persistent signs of hope and resurrection. Maybe we’re in that familiar pew or holding onto our favorite hymnal. Maybe the traditional white paraments and brass communion sets help us remember the hope, the healing, and the renewal that *this* body of Christ has been for us. Yes, today we recognize that everything has changed, that the story didn’t unfold quite the way we imagined it would but we also stand firm with the women, looking at the tomb and holding onto our burial spices which (for us) take the form of the hopes and dreams we had for a future that will never arrive. But still we stand, remembering the words of Jesus and the promise of resurrection – New Life – not just a copy of what used to be.

Though this Easter isn’t exactly how any of us would have imagined, we still have worries about a virus, about our economy, about supply chain, and about wars taking place abroad; we can see a glimpse of resurrection if we look closely enough and if we could just remember....

Remember the joy of a men’s breakfast and theology pub conversation.  
Remember the laughter from the children gathered in for Sunday school.  
Remember the warmth of a sanctuary filled with smiles and alleluia bells.  
Remember the comfort of notes played on an organ or piano.  
Remember the handshake, fist bump, or hug.  
Remember the prayer with a phrase that was just what we needed to hear.  
Remember the way scripture speaks when it is read to the gathered church.  
Remember the miracle of grace poured out at the Lord’s table.

Remember these and so many other pieces of the story – the body of Christ, raised from the tomb.

Remember the words that Jesus spoke.

Remember the promise and know that it is not at all an idle tale.

Remember... and in our remembering, may we be awakened to an expansive life in Christ who *is* very much *alive*.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.