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**Title:** Fake News...Good News

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** Acts 10:34-43

**Text:** Luke 24:1-12

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We've got to deal with the question sooner or later, so we might as well get it out of the way. **When it comes to Easter, what do you believe? Is it fake news or good news?** I know that may seem like an odd way to begin an Easter sermon, but I thought I'd cut to the chase. You see, this isn't my first Easter service. I've been

around the block a time or two, so I think it's a fair question. In fact, I think it's the question for each of us today. Is Easter fake news or good news?

Many years ago, when our church was much smaller and fake news wasn't a phrase that you heard every day, someone stopped by the church and answered our question. That wasn't his intent, but he answered it, nevertheless. It was Tuesday of Holy Week. He introduced himself saying, "I'm Pete and my family and I are going to be with you in worship on Easter. I'm Julie's brother. I'm here to see where to take our children on Sunday." I took him to the back, showed him the education wing and he seemed satisfied that the space was safe and his kids wouldn't be harmed. We came back up to the front and as he was about to leave, I offered him a brochure about our church. As politely as possible, he said "No thanks. We don't need those. We're just coming to be with family. We don't believe in Easter."

He was ahead of the game, smart enough to know that he'd have to deal with the question eventually. He knew that coming with his sister to worship, he wouldn't be anonymous. We'd send him a note inviting him back. We'd try to get him to connect and join. Before I could even respond to his statement that Easter was "fake news," he explained.

"Julie and I both grew up going to church on Easter. It was a big deal for our family. We got new clothes and went to church with our grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins. We took up two long pews. We sat there bored out of our minds, made fun of the choir and slept through the sermon. But after the service, we went to my grandparents' house for dinner. I can still smell the fresh yeast rolls, and taste the ham. We had an Easter Egg hunt,

got jelly beans and chocolate bunnies. That's the Easter I believe in; being with family. But when it comes Jesus rising from the dead, it's a lot like the Beatles nonsense of playing The White Album backward and hearing "Turn me on, dead man." I listened to "Strawberry Fields Forever" forever and always thought I heard John Lennon say, "I buried Paul." The cover of Abbey Road does look like a funeral procession. But in the end, it was all just a big hoax. So is Easter, a centuries-long hoax, material for snopes.com, an urban legend, just a tall tale. Don't hang that on Julie. For some reason, she is a true believer but when it comes to Jesus coming out of the grave, the fact that anyone would believe that story amazes me."

At least he was honest about the question. How about you? ***When it comes to Easter, what do you believe? Is it fake news or good news?***

It's an important question and let's be honest enough today to recognize that we have some Julies here today, true believers and we've got some Petes, just here for family. And we've probably got a lot of people somewhere in between. Maybe a starting point is to suggest that the question isn't new, even though fake news sounds like it has been around for just a couple of years.

There are a number of different viewpoints about Easter but none of them started with the idea that Jesus wasn't dead. It wasn't at all like a Beatles publicity stunt. On Friday, all Jesus acquaintances, including the women watched Jesus die. He was dead; on a cross, he breathed his last. The soldiers who were about to break his legs to hasten death by suffocation decided not to waste their time and energy on a dead man. His death was not just a rumor. <sup>1</sup>This was not fake news. Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus off the cross, "...wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid." (Luke 23:53, 55)

From Friday night until Easter morning, they stumbled through their grief. They try to make sense of something that they never, ever believed would happen. Their understanding comes on Easter morning when they answer our question. In Luke's story, we see three answers, one has to do with doubt, another with memory and the third amazement.

You know how the story goes. On Easter morning, at early dawn, Luke says three women walk to the tomb with the spices to anoint the body. They were expecting death, not life. But when they arrived, "They found the stone rolled away from the tomb but when they went in, they did not find the body." (Luke 24:3-4) which left them perplexed. Why? They were still working on the hypothesis that Jesus was dead. Suddenly two men in

dazzling white clothes stood beside them and they were terrified. I've been in that tomb. You've been looking at a picture of it all morning. It's not big. Five would be a crowd, inches away from one another. They say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." (Luke 24:5) The women were not able to absorb this news immediately, so the men offer help.

"Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. Then they remembered his words..." (Luke 24:6-8) In an instant, the women began to recall his words and to put together how both death and resurrection were part of the plan that Jesus had laid out for them. They remember and they are the first to answer the question, "Is this fake news or good news?" Luke doesn't say they answer the question because of an empty tomb or two dazzling white men. They don't need a body or an encounter with a risen Savior. Then and there they remember time spent with Jesus what He meant to them and how He promised to be with him. They remembered what it all means and believed, and it seems to them to be incredibly good news.

So, the women returned from the tomb and told this to the 11 disciples, as well as to the rest of the followers of Jesus. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. (Luke 24:11) They thought it was "fake news." The Greek word for idle tale is λῆρος (lēros)=idle tale. That a generous translation. Other translations use nonsense. That's not even strong enough. The root word is "delirious."<sup>2</sup> And so, what they really were saying was that the women were out of their minds, crazy, as if mentally ill, spouting "fake news." They doubt.

When it comes to this position on Easter, Thomas is the name that comes to mind. He represents the position of doubt even though according to Luke, on Easter morning he has plenty of company. There is a lot of doubt and every Easter there always is. For the Thomases of the world, the question gets rewritten. ***When it comes to Easter, what do you believe? Is it fake news or good news?*** Thomas rewrites the question, making it "When it comes to Easter, what do you doubt?" Is it fake news or good news?

Thomas and his fellow skeptic disciples have a point which we need on Easter. An empty tomb proves nothing more than an open grave and missing body. A father and a young child were driving by a graveyard. Near the road was a freshly dug grave. "Look, Daddy," she shouted, "Easter!" Of course, in such circumstances, we know that seeing doesn't necessarily mean believing.

Thomas and the other disciples have all kinds of doubts about what is going on and if you and I were put in their shoes, most of us are right there. How can the stone be rolled away? Who are these men in dazzling clothes? Why the folded linen? Where's the body? If we so wished, we could spend the entire day coming up with questions of Easter doubt. Their question is "When it comes to Easter, what do I doubt?"

But we discover that when they shift the question, decide to answer the right question, "What do I believe", they get there. Every one of them eventually finds a way to embrace what at first seems like fake as Good News.

The position of memory, a position of doubt. And there is also the position of amazement, the "scratch your head, take some time to process the information, what's all this about" amazement that comes in confronting something completely outside of your realm of previous experience. Luke describes them as "slow of heart to believe." Peter represents this position. After the women are accused of an idle tale, of nonsense, of spreading "fake news", "Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened." (Luke 24:12) Peter checks out their story at the tomb and seeing the empty tomb and linens, scratches his head and then he goes home amazed. He is so amazed at the turn of events that even though "slow of heart to believe", he eventually embraces the Good News. God was doing something new and different with Jesus and it was simply amazing. Some of us don't believe quickly. Some of us need time to process Easter, to think about our question, "What do I believe?"

Which brings us back to the question. ***When it comes to Easter, what do you believe? Is it fake news or good news?*** Do you know? Here is my guess.

A few of you are like Thomas and his fellow disciples, full of doubts. If so, I invite you to consider the other question, not what you doubt but what do you believe? Don't count your doubts. Start with what you believe and you may it is a starting point and you may find out those doubts aren't really a problem. Jesus doesn't quantify how much you have to believe, just believe.

Still, more of you are like Peter. You really want a strong Easter faith, a strong commitment to the resurrection. You want to hold onto the promise of the life that Jesus makes. But it is so fantastic, so amazing that you find yourself "just a little slow of heart" to believe. That's not a problem because Jesus doesn't put a limit on how quickly or fully, we believe.

Which leaves the rest of you and God bless you for being like the women. You remember and it is the in memory of Jesus ministry, in His words, in all that He taught us, in all that He promises, you remember and believe! Every Easter you remember and every Easter your faith is renewed and grows stronger. Just like the first women of Easter, you lift the burden of the question off us. And the memory of you, with the memory of countless people who have gone before you through the world, and throughout the ages, help us. You remember and we believe. Thanks be to God!

"My sister is a true believer but when it comes to Jesus coming out of the grave stuff, the fact that anyone would believe that story amazes me."  
"Oh, so you're just like your namesake," I said.

"What?" Pete asked.

"The Gospel of Luke tells us that when Peter showed up for Easter, he was amazed too." Being amazed by Easter is not too bad a place to be.

He left, scratching his head. I wondered if he'd show up or if he'd be too embarrassed because of his confession. He did, and on his way out, he looked me in the eye and said, "Amazing!"

And every Easter since, he's remembered and shouted, "Christ is Risen, He has risen indeed!" And that is incredibly Good News!

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus is Dead! April 21, 2019. Retrieved by subscription at homilectics.com.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.studylight.org/lexicons/greek/3026.html>