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Title: Idle Tale or Gospel Truth

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Text: [Luke 24:1-12](#)

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My first memory of a cemetery is going to the burial of my grandfather, who died when I was five years old. He was the fire chief in Decatur, Georgia, my buddy in eating egg salad sandwiches, and as a five-year-old, he was my hero. I've since had other occasions to be in a cemetery and almost all of them are difficult trips. You are saying goodbye

to a loved one, a friend, or a beloved member of the congregation. You typically don't wait around for them to reappear and come walking toward you. You are there to say goodbye, pay your respects and then figure out how to handle your grief and move on with your life. You don't expect much else to happen.

According to Luke's Gospel, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and other women whose names are not listed have come to Jesus' grave to pay their respects, to prepare his body for final burial. They knew, at least they thought they knew what to expect. When they arrive, they find a most incredible scene, a scene that was thought to be impossible.

"They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling white clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen." Luke 24:2-5 NRSV

With these words, the good news of the most significant event in human history, the most transformative event the world has ever known, is made real. Easter begins at daybreak, in a cemetery of all places, where the truth that the worst things are never the last things, that not even death can overcome life in God's realm.

The women run to tell the other disciples, the other apostles who are locked away out of fear or perhaps prisoners of their pain, or maybe a little bit of both.

"Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them to be an idle tale and they did not believe them. But 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 24:10-12 NRSV

Many of the other disciples were skeptical of the claims that Jesus had risen from the dead, that the tomb was empty. They believe it to be an "idle tale." All except Peter, who runs to the tomb to look and see if the good news is true.

We have two competing claims here, one that says the tomb is empty and another that says it is an idle tale.

To be fair, experience teaches us that not much happens in a cemetery. When two competing claims collide, we tend to fall back on what we know, what we have experienced, rather than what may be possible. Experience teaches that empire wins, that death wins. As we sit here today, we wrestle with the same choice that those who followed Jesus long ago had to make.

Is this an idle tale or is it gospel truth?

Think about some of the things going on in the world right now: The Russian invasion of Ukraine, the marginalization of groups of people, the shooting on a subway in Brooklyn and this is not to mention any pain and struggle we carry in our lives. It can be easy to believe that death wins. That nothing much has changed with the tomb of our lives.

Will Willimon is a preacher and a teacher, and he says this: *"The challenge in preaching the resurrection of Christ is not convincing modern people that resurrection is possible, it's convincing modern people that it only happened once."*

Each Gospel tells a resurrection story, and each tells it a little differently, I resonate with Luke's version because Luke tells of the resurrection as a discovery rather than an appearance. Jesus does not appear to the women who discover the empty tomb, nor does Jesus appear to Peter when he runs to check.

We are in the position of those in Luke's Gospel who hear the news. Although we can't physically go to an empty tomb, we are invited to discover for ourselves the truth of the resurrection. We are invited to discover for

ourselves this gift of new life. We are invited to discover for ourselves if this gift is an idle tale or if this gift is true Gospel truth.

The movie *The Shawshank Redemption* is a powerful film. The word redemption in the title is a clue that this is a resurrection movie. It takes place in a prison and the main character Andy Dufrene doesn't exactly impress fellow inmate and narrator Red. Dufrene has been unjustly arrested, convicted, and imprisoned and as we watch him through the eyes of Red, we see that Andy is different. He is kind in a brutal world. He is a man who creates a library for other inmates and does the taxes of his captors. He eventually begins work in the warden's office and plays Mozart over the loudspeakers. As every person in that prison stops to hear it, Red proclaims, "Those voices soared and for the briefest of moments, every man at Shawshank felt free."

Andy is persecuted by the warden, who hands him a Bible and tells him "Salvation lies within."

The warden was not lying. The Bible is where Andy Dufrene hides the small hammer that he uses to chip his way to freedom. The cut-out space where Andy hides the hammer begins on the first page of the book of Exodus, the story of God liberating God's people from bondage. Andy descends into what some would call hell. He chisels his way through 500 yards of prison sewage. He comes out the other side cleansed by the river and the rain and holds his hands up high in light and freedom. His empty prison cell, the tomb of his life, sits empty as the warden looks in. It's the beginning of the end of the warden's reign of terror over the prison.

Now, it's a story, but it describes life. It's not an idle tale, rather it describes Gospel truth. It describes the new life and new possibilities that God is setting before you and me today.

An empty cell, an empty tomb is an end, the death of impossibility.

It is the story of the whole Bible. This is what God does.

In the beginning, out of a formless void, came light, water, and dry land. From the clay of a riverbank, God formed humanity in God's own image. In Exodus, people walk on dry land through the sea and are freed from bondage.

Isaiah tells us that one day we will see the wolves shall live with the lamb and later says that God is doing a new thing.

The Gospel of John begins with the Word becoming flesh and dwelling here with us, and we hear early in the Gospel of Luke that "nothing will be impossible with God."

New life is what God does. The possibility of new life, here and now, for you and me, is God's greatest gift.

Peter knows this. The one who runs to the empty tomb, filled with hope that death has indeed been defeated, would soon give this testimony to a large crowd in Jerusalem.

"But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." Acts 2:24 NRSV

In Christ, by the power of the resurrection, it is impossible for you to be held in death's power. It's impossible for this world to be held in death's power.

An old preaching professor once said there have only been two great revolutions in the history of humankind. Just two that changed human life forever. The first revolution, he says is that when people started to farm. When humanity moved from hunters and gatherers, moving from place to place, living day to day. Then suddenly someone dropped a seed in the ground and things changed. Someone dropped a seed and things changed. A new way of living was born. Someone dropped a seed in the ground and human life changed. Human beings would not have to live day to day anymore. People could put down roots and make plans. Human life changed. Because this is a preaching professor, you probably can guess what the second revolution is. We have an idea of where he lived, and how he lived. We know what he taught, God's inclusive and expansive love for all, justice, compassion, peace, mercy, generosity, and grace. We know that he also taught us that following him, living in the way he calls us to live, would not be easy. It would bring us out of our comfort zones. It would call us to new ways of ordering our lives together. He taught us that we are going to have to sacrifice something, perhaps several things, if life is ever to be the way God desires it to be. We know he shared a final meal in an upper room, and we know how he died. And now, on this day, we know that even death, even a tomb could not hold him. That which was impossible was now possible. In Jesus, we see the gift of new life. Not just for Jesus, but for each of us.

Idle Tale or Gospel Truth?

It is up to each one of us to decide. Are we ready to expect something different? To peer into an empty tomb to find that love has triumphed over death forever. And in doing so, has offered each of us the gift of new life.

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed.