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Title: Idle Tale or Gospel Truth?

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

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I am going to preach for the next 13 or 14 minutes but my sermon is essentially only seven words long. Those seven words are: "HE IS NOT HERE BUT HAS RISEN". For those needing to make a grocery list, finish today's crossword puzzle or play Wordle – I don't play Wordle – it's just too much stress – or even step out to

make Easter brunch reservations, you can safely do that and still be able to converse with family and friends at lunch about the point of the sermon – just remember – HE IS NOT HERE BUT HAS RISEN.

Are those seven words an idle tale or gospel truth? That's the ultimate question that every person who hears the news that we've heard today must answer. That's been the case from that first Easter morning to this Easter morning - from the women and the disciples who heard it on that Easter to you hearing it today.

The women were at the tomb at first light - many women, apparently. Luke names three by name and then adds, "and the other women" – more than any other gospel. "Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them..." (Luke 24:10) They, or anyone else, would have been prohibited by sabbath rules from caring for the body of Jesus before the sabbath ended at daybreak. There was a rush on Friday evening to get the body to the tomb before the beginning of the Sabbath at sunset.

Now, a rush by the women, carrying the spices they had prepared, to be there at dawn as the sabbath ended. These women were attentive to both their faith and their responsibilities to care for the body. They arrive only to find the stone that was used to seal the tomb rolled away. Upon investigation – looking inside the tomb - the body that they came to care for is missing.

Can you imagine even for a moment what these women felt and thought? Did they think they might have come to the wrong tomb? After all, it was early in the morning – you know how it's hard to see at dusk and dawn – it's light out but not really. Their eyes were likely blurred with tears and they surely hadn't slept well. But it had to be the right tomb. They would have been there when Jesus' body was put there. Luke says, “. . . they were perplexed about this.” (Luke 24:4a) Shortly after arrival, they encounter two men in dazzling clothes and Luke takes their emotions up a notch and uses the word “terrified.”

I'm right there with them. Perplexed, sure, but also apprehensive, afraid, terrified – those are all good descriptors. These two men standing there telling the women that “HE IS NOT HERE BUT HAS RISEN.” It didn't take these women very long to figure things out. Luke tells us that once these men remind the women of what Jesus had said about his death and resurrection, their negative emotions were put to rest. Doubt turned to faith. Being perplexed turned to understanding. Being afraid and apprehensive went by the wayside. They knew what that empty tomb meant and they headed out to share the Good News.

They head directly to the apostles, now 11 of them, and report their findings. Luke is the only of the four gospels to report what the eleven were thinking when the women tell their story – “But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” (Luke 24:11). The last verse of Luke's resurrection account has one of the eleven, Peter, running to the tomb to see if what the women said might have a shred of truth to it. The account ends with Peter seeing for himself and returning home and being “amazed at what had happened.”

The apostles thinking that the women were telling an “idle tale” reminded me of last year's Netflix movie, *Don't Look Up*. {INSERT PICTURE} It stars Leonardo DiCaprio as Randall and Jennifer Lawrence as Kate. The two are astronomers who discover that an asteroid is on a collision course with Earth. They try to get the government and the general public to do something about it – even just to believe them. From the beginning of their attempts to share the news, Randall gets listened to and respected more than Kate, and she is portrayed as being too emotional.

Later, as a general denial of the seriousness of the situation grows, Kate and Randall team up to start an information campaign online when the asteroid becomes visible from the earth, telling people to “Look Up!” so that they can believe by seeing for themselves what they are being told. The politicians, however, start their campaign - “Don't Look Up!” At every turn, the people

who know the truth are made out to be hysterical and too emotional and it's maddening to watch.¹

Many people think that modern skepticism regarding miraculous events raises our doubts about reports of Jesus' resurrection. But Luke's account of the apostles' reaction to the women that this is an "idle tale" reminds all of us who celebrate Easter that faith begins in the tomb – then and now. Before we can do anything else in our faith journey, we have to decide if this is an idle tale or gospel truth. Preacher Fred Craddock observed that "Matters of faith are never finally proven. Faith is communicated by witness."² That is where we find ourselves this day.

Over time, this idle tale lightened up a darkened future but, at the time, after what had happened to Jesus, their faith must have been shaken. How would they go on? The tomb of death became darker than ever. If we say this is an idle tale, we're saying we're satisfied with a darkened tomb that has no exit – for Jesus and us. Can we be satisfied with that, especially for ourselves and those we love? What does it do to our conception of life itself to believe that it simply ends and that that is all there is to it?

When Sigmund Freud's daughter, Sophia, died of influenza, he was so numbed by the sudden tragedy that he could only say unbelievably, "She was blown away as if she had never been." Her influence may have lived on in his life and the lives of others, but what about that terrible darkness at the end of her life?³

Leo Tolstoy lost three children and two aunts to death during the four years he was writing his novel, *Anna Karenina*. The novel is permeated with the question of meaning in the face of death. One of his biographers says: "Tolstoy had reached the farthest point to which his intelligence and imagination could take him as an observer of life, and there he found only one meaningful question: When one recognizes the inevitability of death, how can he go on living?"⁴

The news the disciples at first called an idle tale can help with Freud's and Tolstoy's and our questions because it points to a dazzling light in an empty tomb. All is not darkness in the mysterious region of death. There is a light in the darkness, and it speaks of life and joy! After more than twenty centuries, some still call the news of Christ's resurrection an idle tale. But many others, in every century, since the news was first announced, have been convinced, because of their encounter with the living Christ, that it is not an idle tale but rather is gospel truth.

This news that is gospel truth – news of a risen Christ - is an invitation to let a dream take hold of us. We can live in companionship with one who talked about a kingdom where God's will would be done on earth as it is done in heaven. We need to be possessed by that dream. This Christ who now speaks on the resurrection side of that garden tomb calls us to loyalty to him, to serve in his name. Even when our commitment becomes weak and slack, he keeps calling us to faithfulness and purposeful devotion to him. And because death could not hold him, there is light in the darkness. So we can have hope of life, abundant and eternal, both now and beyond the event of death.

Historians may remember the name Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. Bukharin was a Russian Communist leader. He took part in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, was editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda and was a full member of the Politburo. His works on economics and political science are still read today. I read about him this week in a condensed version of the relationship between Ukraine and the beginning of the Soviet Union in 1922.

There is a story told about a journey Bukharin took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd, he aimed at Christianity hurling insults, arguments, and proof against it. An hour later he was finished. He looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of people's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded.

Deafening silence filled the auditorium but then one man approached the platform and mounted the lectern and stood near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left and then to the right. Finally, he shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "CHRIST IS RISEN!" En masse the crowd rose as one and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: "HE IS RISEN INDEED!"⁵

When Jesus rose, he left the tomb behind. The tomb is a bit actor in this Easter drama. It had its moment of glory on the stage, and then it was gone. The Gospel leaves it behind. We need to leave the tomb behind so that we can understand what has happened for us on this amazing day. If we continue to gaze at the tomb, all we'll see is dark emptiness. We'll miss the blazing brightness of a risen Christ. If we continue to gaze at the tomb, all we see is the reminder of death. We'll miss the glory of life following a risen Christ.

Though the apostles did not believe them, what the women knew and shared could not be taken away from them. The same is true for us today. Everything that weighs us down can be put to death in order for God to raise

us to new life. That is true no matter who else believes or accepts it. Like the women, we can become true apostles without the need for a title. We can hold fast to the truth we know in our bones. We can witness with hope and faith what the Holy Spirit has given to our spirit. We can worship and praise God and remember Christ even if others tell us to take our idle tale and go home.

Those women at the tomb were amazing. Once they understood the meaning of the empty tomb, they left the tomb behind. Let me say that again so you can do the same - "they left the tomb behind." They ran to tell others what had happened. They didn't run and tell others, "go back and look at the empty tomb." They ran to tell others the Good News. They said, "He is risen!" It was a paraphrase of the sermon in seven words they had heard from the men at the tomb. "HE IS NOT HERE BUT HAS RISEN." That is no idle tale. It is truth, glorious, wonderful, gospel truth!

¹ Don't Look Up illustration idea from Sermon Commentary for Sunday, APRIL 17, 2022. Luke 24:1-12 Commentary by Chelsey Harmon found at Center for Excellence in Preaching, www.cepreaching.org.

² Craddock, Fred. Interpretation Commentary Series, Luke. Section on Luke 24.

³ Francine Klagsbrun, Sigmund Freud (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1967), pp. 85-86.

⁴ Morris Philipson, The Count Who Wished He Were a Peasant (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), pp. 85-86.

⁵ James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988) p. 167.