

Easter - 04.17.22 - Luke 24: 1-12

The exact number of women who went to the tomb early Easter morning isn't recorded by Luke. Regardless of the number, the group moved with a common purpose and goal - to finish the burial preparation of the body of Jesus - to render one final loving service to the man who had come to mean so much to them in such a short time.

Three women are identified. The first is Mary Magdalene. We know little of her from Scripture. She was healed by Jesus when he cast out of her life 7 demons as recorded in both Luke and Mark's Gospel. She is from the fishing town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, Magdala - hence Magdalene. Her name appears 12 times in the Gospels, which is a lot - more often than some disciples. We don't know the nature of her disturbance - physical, emotional, moral, and there is no reason in Scripture to believe she was a reformed prostitute. She was with Jesus as he entered Jerusalem to the cheering crowd waving palms. She watched him crucified, and saw where his body was laid in the tomb.

The other Mary, according to Luke, is the wife of Clopas, and according to John, the sister of Jesus' mother, Mary. Other ancient authorities note Clopas was a brother of Joseph whose home Jesus was raised as his son. She was family by marriage, and is Mary Magdalene's traveling companion. She also had followed Jesus into the city, saw him die on the cross, and now is among the mourners on their way to the gravesite.

Joanna is the third woman identified by Luke. Like Mary Magdalene, she knew first hand the healing touch of Jesus. She was married to the Chuza, a steward to King Herod. Joanna would have lived in Jerusalem, a city person, and so likely did not travel as widely with Jesus as had the two Marys; but unlike them, she had the means to provide Jesus with financial support.

There were other women, not named, accompanying these three to the tomb that morning long ago, just as there are friends and neighbors who gather at the graveside when I conduct a committal service. Some are at the graveside out of love for the deceased, and Mary, Joanna and Mary loved Jesus. Some are there out of a sense of responsibility, whether that be a religious duty or from an obligation of friendship. I imagine all of us know this mix of emotions - love and duty and respect and obligation. We also have this in common with those who went to the tomb that morning: when we are at the graveside, it is because someone has died. The women went to the tomb that morning because Jesus was dead. They had zero expectation of discovering an empty tomb, nor of encountering God's messengers with the news of resurrection. It seems no one, not even those closest to him, who loved him and wanted to see him properly buried, believed he would be raised from the dead. They went expecting to see the familiar body of Jesus who had died. They arrived to greet the mystery of God in the resurrection of Jesus.

Our Presbyterian understanding of faith is that it is never 100% pure. Belief is always mixed with disbelief. Mary Magdalene and Joanna believed in God's healing power in Jesus; all of them believed his teaching about the kingdom was of God. But they stopped there in their faith. Luke

writes they were perplexed by the absence of the body, and terrified by the presence of angels. Terrified by angels I understand; but that word, perplexed, is a good one - the English translation does not do justice to the sense of shock conveyed by that word Greek: shocked, stupefied, speechless and frozen still.

None of us really fault the disciples for failing to believe the women when they returned with the incredible story of an empty tomb and angels and reports of a risen Jesus whom no one has seen. It made no sense. They don't believe the women. It was illogical, contrary to nature, and the witness of their eyes, those few who had watched the crucifixion of Jesus from afar.

We don't fault ourselves either, for our failure to believe the women's account. We struggle with the same tension of belief and disbelief, for the story is hard to believe. We are no different than those in first century Palestine because we live in a technologically more sophisticated era, with the advantage of culture and science to inform. We are just as human, just as mixed up as they were on the first Easter. In all honesty, faith and the lack of faith are mixed together in our hearts this Easter morning.

Some of us have a mix of belief and disbelief heavy on the side of belief; others have the mix more weighted on the side of disbelief. But none of us is without the mix! If we totally did not believe we wouldn't be here in worship, in church, on Easter. If we were totally of faith, I suspect we would be so holy as to be lifted right into heaven where we would be face to face with God Almighty. No one looks to be in danger of bumping their head on the ceiling. I certainly feel well grounded, and I am called to preach this story to you this morning, this Easter morning.

We may not have angels speaking to us about resurrection as did the women - you only have me this morning! We may not have first hand real time experiences with Jesus as did the disciples, but we have the Bible. We may not have amazing mountain top moments of high spirituality, but then Jesus used familiar examples when he taught - sparrows of the air and delicate lilies of the field. He spoke of managing money properly, of losing and finding things, of family dynamics when the prodigal returns home, and of helping the stranger along the side of the road. He showed his disciples how to decentralize the ego, to be humble but not passive before God in times of frustration, anger, perplexity. He taught the crowds who followed him how to pray. And at the end, he showed that his kingdom was not to be a sphere of external royalty but an interior realm of holiness. Each ordinary moment with Jesus is pregnant with the resurrection power of God.

I am glad that Luke either did not know or did not choose to record the exact number of women on their way to the tomb. Now, you and I can place ourselves among them, with our mixed motives and less than pure faith. We, too, hear angels say, "Why do seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen," and like Peter, go home marveling at what had happened. Amen.