

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
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Luke 24:1-12, Acts 10:34-43  
Who Will We Believe?

Jesus told his disciples what would happen. He told them he was going to Jerusalem to die. When James and John asked to sit at his right and left hand he asked them, “Can you drink of the same cup that I drink?” Jesus told them all to pick up their cross and follow him. He told them he would die and be raised again.

Yet in our story from Luke we see only a few, grieving, women, who have been with him from the beginning come to the tomb. We do not know where the men are. Perhaps hiding so that they would not suffer the same fate as Jesus. But women were nothing, certainly not people the Romans would fear as rebels or insurrectionists and execute. So the helpless women watched as Jesus was crucified, they saw him die, and witnessed his body laid in the tomb. In shock and deep sorrow they come to anoint his body, to pay their final respects.

The tomb is empty?! They are perplexed. What happened?! They have forgotten what Jesus told them.

So along come two men in shining garments (read angels?), to tell them, “He is risen! Remember how he spoke to you... must be... crucified and the third day rise again.” Oh, yes, remember what Jesus said?!

So they go to the eleven and all the rest, and guess what? They have all forgotten what Jesus told them too. “[The women’s] words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them.” So Peter runs to the tomb, to see for himself and marvels- he cannot believe his eyes. They did not believe Jesus, they did not believe the women, they did not believe their own eyes.

Who or what will we believe? We live in a time of critical thinking. We live in a time of cynicism and skepticism. We live in a time of questioning historical accuracy and factual validity. This story is reported in all four gospels, and we heard read what Paul reported as well. In each case, the story is just a little bit different. There are no extra-biblical sources (no historians who are not Christians) to corroborate this story. So who do we believe? Or do we believe at all?

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan encourage us to look at these stories beyond their historical factuality to their more-than-factual meanings,<sup>1</sup> to find the deep, profound truth within them. They say that “fixating on “whether it happened this way,” almost always leads one

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<sup>1</sup> The Last Week, pg 191-192.

astray.”<sup>2</sup> But looking for the meaning of the story can keep us on track. I think that finding what is common in the versions of the Easter story can help in this.

In all four gospels, the women come to the tomb to anoint the body of one who is already gone. They come to do what is right according to their custom and tradition. But they are living in the past. The angels ask, “why do you come to find one who is living among the dead?” He who was crucified, is risen! We often live in the past. We cling to things that are long past dead and gone. We do this to honor the past, but also because we are afraid to move into the future.

The stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty. There are burial cloths—evidence of where the body was laid. Jesus’ body is gone. There is nothing left for them. There are many barriers to our ability to believe. Stones get in the way of opportunities to see a future we have yet to dream. We need factual evidence of possibilities beyond our imaginations, like a missing body and empty burial cloths. Even then, when all we have clung to is gone, even when only an empty hole remains, it can be hard to understand that it is time for us to let go and move on.

The women go and tell the disciples, and they did not believe. They had to see for themselves. Our friends and families and colleagues and even

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<sup>2</sup> The Last Week, pg 194

our own minds can tell us, but we do not hear what we do not want to hear, what we are afraid to hear. Even if it is something we have known all along.

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Jesus told them all to pick up their cross and follow him. He told them he would die and be raised again.

He told them he would die. Jesus knew that what he was teaching, what he believed, what he was living, was dangerous. He knew it would cost him his life. Yet, he did it anyway. And he called his disciples to follow in his footsteps, to teach, and preach, and live the Way he did. They lived with him, walked with him, learned directly from him, heard it from him, they said they believed him. And then they ran away, they forgot, they questioned, they did not believe.

How much easier then is it for us to forget. How easy is it for us to question, and wonder, and ask. Who will we believe? Will we believe at all? And if so, what will we do about it? For Jesus taught that to truly believe, we must live it.

Jesus told them he would die, but he also told them, he would be raised again. In spite of the powers and principalities of Rome that doomed

his ministry and executed him as a rebel, in spite of the power of the leaders of the temple who betrayed him and their people into cruel bondage, in spite of disciples who ran away, denied him, forgot what he told them, and could not believe what they saw with their own eyes, in spite of the power of death, Jesus rose again to new life.

If it were not so, I would have told you. After 2000 years, Jesus and all he taught, all he was and is and will be, lives and breathes here in this place.

So who will we believe, and what will we do about it? And what will we live? We will believe what we know in our hearts to be true.

We will not live in the past or cling to things that are long gone. We will honor the past, but we will not be afraid to move into the future. We will seek the barriers that get in the way of opportunities to see a future we have yet to dream. Then together we will roll away the stones that get in the way of possibilities beyond our imaginations. We will begin to understand that it is time for us to let go and move on. We will listen and hear, even those things that we do not want to hear, what we are afraid to hear, what we have known all along, and together we will make plans and take action to move into God's future.

We will listen again to what Jesus has said. We will not forget. We will follow. Jesus told the disciples he would die and he told them to pick up their cross and follow him. Today we have the chance to follow and to be in ministry as his disciples. But only if we discern what it is that we are called to do here in this place in the name of the one we call Jesus, the Christ.

Jesus' passion was building the beloved community, bringing about the kingdom of God, and calling all people to be God's people. His mission: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.<sup>3</sup> If we believe him, what part of his ministry and mission and passion are we going to take up so that we can follow him? For if we believe that in Jesus, the Christ is new life, how can we not live in his Way?!

And when things get tough and we get discouraged we will support and lift each other. We will remind each other that Jesus said he would die and be raised again. It was for this message, this mission, this passion that Jesus willingly gave his life. And we have been promised when in the service of his ministry, when we face death, when we fall, we too will be raised again, and again and again.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:18-19

That is good news. Amen.