

Easter 2019  
*Overflowing Life*  
Luke 24:1-12

I would guess that you came to church today already knowing—mostly—what the message of this day is. If you grew up hanging around the church or even in this still largely Christian culture, you have heard the Easter story before—probably dozens of times. But here you are to hear it again—this impossible story of hope that says life is bigger and sturdier than circumstances often suggest. The story doesn't change from year to year, but we do. And so we re-write the Easter story today, in the intersection between these ancient words and our lives.

Today maybe the story will find in you a sort of in-spite-of-it-all optimism about the future. Or maybe today you really need to hear a familiar story, a story to restore your sense that the world has not spun *completely* out of control. Whatever your reason is for being in church today, I'm glad you're here. If you feel this morning a little like you're observing a holiday that has a good color scheme and happy music, but whose meaning is pretty much a mystery to you, I want to tell you that you that you're in good company. Many of us still aren't quite sure we've completely understood the Easter story. All of us are still figuring out how Easter will make a difference once we get home from brunch this afternoon, or when the alarm goes off at 6:00 tomorrow morning. Resurrection—life that overcomes death—is a hard thing to understand...maybe impossible, really, for us to grasp fully.

So—how much harder it must have been for the people who tried to make sense of that first Easter without having heard someone else tell the story first...*and* without the soundtrack we've created for it over the last two thousand years. And let's be clear: it's the Church's soundtrack. There's no version of the story of that first Easter morning that features trumpets. Even the 'heavenly host' of angels who they say sang in the nighttime sky at Jesus' birth were curiously silent. No...the Easter story begins in silence, and darkness, and sadness. That's not a late-added dramatic flourish. That's the story, the way it was told from the beginning.

It was just a few women who went to the tomb that morning, and they went without expectation. They wanted just one last little bit of time with this person they loved. There was no song in their hearts as they walked.. They went with their heads bowed over. Their shoulders were bent with grief. Their friend had died. Their hearts were broken. What they knew that morning, most of all, was what a cruel place the world could be. But those women were brave enough to stay with their sadness. In their grief, they came right back to the place where they knew death lived.

When they got there, they noticed immediately that something was different from the way they had left it the day before. On Friday, when Jesus' body was laid out in the tomb carved out of the hillside, a rock had been carefully lodged into the opening. That rock was important. It was big, and heavy. Its purpose was to keep life—out here—separated from death—which is a reality, but is always better confined in a small space in the corner. Now that rock was gone.

Somehow, that big, immovable thing that was supposed to keep life and death in their proper places had been moved.

Here's the real bravery of those women: when they saw that Jesus' tomb had been disturbed, they did not run away screaming or piece together some story about grave robbery—which wouldn't have been an unreasonable response. No—they walked straight into the darkness, to see for themselves. And they saw there what perhaps we all fear most: nothingness. Nothing. No body. Nothing. This wasn't good news. It was completely unnerving. They were terrified, Luke tells us. So disoriented that all they could do was lay down with their faces flat on the ground

Suddenly, two angels, or voices that might have belonged to angels. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” the angels asked. Well, those women must have thought, we're *not* actually seeking the living among the dead. We're here for someone who *is* dead. “He's not here,” the angels said. “*Don't you remember?* He told you that he was going to die. And he told you that on the third day he would rise again.”

And I wonder a little about the tone of those angels' voices, because I know those “Don't you remember?” conversations. “Don't you remember?” is a familiar phrase in houses where people live together—maybe especially people who are married to each other. It has a favorite sister phrase, which is “I already told you...” Often these phrases follow a question like: “What are we doing for dinner tonight?” “Don't you remember?...I told you...”

I'm usually pretty impatient with these conversations. But I know why they happen. We don't remember things—no matter how many times we're told—until there's some container inside of us to catch the information. I remember what we're having for dinner because I'm cooking, and I wrote down the ingredients on my grocery list. My daughter won't remember because until she's eaten it, my dinner recipe is just words that pass over the surface of her brain. I notice the same thing when I meet someone new. Even when I ask for a name and I think I'm listening carefully, I often won't remember it. Until I have a story about who you are, a container to put your name in, it's likely not to catch in my memory.

The women did finally remember what Jesus had said, but it wasn't until after the angels reminded them. And I wonder if even after that, they didn't have to think for a few minutes first. What was it he said, exactly? Where were they when they heard it first? What was the context? Is *this* what he meant?

The same thing happened when the women tried later that day to tell the disciples what happened at the tomb. “*Don't you remember?*” I imagine the women asked those men. No, they didn't. Jesus *had* told them that he would die. He *did* tell them that death would not hold him, that he would live again. He'd said it more than once. But it hadn't made any sense to them. There was no container in their minds where they could put a thought as strange as death being anything other than not-life.

So no trumpets then either. In fact, 'nonsense' is how the disciples responded to the women's report. 'Idle tales' is how some other translations of the Bible put it, and I'm going to move right

past all the things I want to say about how ‘nonsense’ and ‘idle tales’ sound like dismissals that get applied to women and not men. (Ahem.)

But I get their skepticism. I’ve never known someone who died and then left their grave and come back to life. When someone you love dies, you don’t wait around for him to re-appear so that you can pick up where you left off. You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life the best you can. New life next spring might happen to butterflies and daffodils, but it’s not going to happen to the person you loved. We’re grown-ups. We know that death and life are separate things.

Luke tells us one more story about that first day. It happened on a road that leads from Jerusalem to a town called Emmaus. For hours, two disciples—people who had known him well!—walked right next to Jesus. They told him their friend had just died, and how awful it was. He told them stories they’d heard Jesus tell before. When he talked something melted a little in their hearts. And *still* they didn’t recognize him. *Don’t you remember?* No, they didn’t. They thought he was just a stranger.

That whole first Easter day ends up kind of anti-climactic. No one grasps the full meaning of the resurrection.

The same thing happens again and again in the story, every time Jesus shows up after the resurrection. Every story begins with confusion and disorientation, bewilderment. Every single person Jesus finds and shows his resurrected self to starts out lost in sorrow and confusion and doubt. Every encounter begins with a stranger whose face only slowly comes into focus and only gradually begins to look like God alive again.

Maybe the Easter story tells us that’s how God always comes to us. Not with a clatter, or with trumpets, but slipping in from the silence, with signs of life that we don’t recognize at first. Good news that we don’t even remember someone promised us once. Joy that slowly, gradually, overflows into that part of our lives we thought was entirely set aside for other things: sadness, loss, worry, loneliness.

Maybe, just like the people who were there on that first day, we’ll never be entirely sure that it’s Jesus standing in front of us. Maybe new life will always show up slightly disguised—as a friend, a shared meal, a surprising love that slips in beside you. Maybe, no matter how hard we think we are listening and paying attention, we will always be waking up slowly to the possibility that God is beckoning us to new life. Maybe truth will always come in an echo: *Don’t you remember?*

So let’s keep gathering at the table, listening to nonsensical stories, treating the strangers among us as divine messengers. Let’s stay open to encounters that we don’t understand completely but that strangely warm our hearts. Because maybe, just maybe, this is how you carve out a container inside of you to hold good news. Good news that life—your life—is bigger and more persistent than you thought. Good news that will make you joyful. Good news you’ll want to remember later, on all the days your life asks you to walk straight into the darkness.