

Perplexed
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 24:1-12

Perplexed. Have you ever felt confused? I don't know what's worse, feeling confused or the worry that someone will see or sense how confused you really are. Sitting up here in the chancel from Sunday to Sunday, I regularly get to observe your panic when people are not where you expect them to be at that moment and on the high holy days that panic is amplified as different generations of a family plan to meet at a certain spot at a certain time so that they can sit together, but usually at least one or two members of the family either didn't get the email or don't remember the meeting spot or are habitually late.

I'll see frowning faces and twisting necks in the pews looking back, looking at watches, and looking back again. By the time we're confessing our sins, I'll see the anxious faces and heaving chests of the stray relatives, out of breath and sliding through the doors, desperately scanning pews and balcony for the familiar steam exiting the ears of the parent they had promised to meet in the Narthex twenty minutes ago.

When appointments are not met or circumstance does not match expectation, it is as if a boisterous, contentious conference of emotions

have selected your brain for their annual convention. Shock, panic, annoyance, fear, embarrassment, and confusion start churning out conspiracy theories like tabloid journalists hoping to catch your eye at the grocery checkout line.

Has anyone here ever been stood up? I remember some thirty-two years ago, those tortured single days I refer to as B.D. (before Donna), I was sitting alone at the old Hotel Charlotte on Sharon-Amity and coming to the realization that my date with a young woman I had met on a run was not going to materialize.

I have to confess that I wasn't overcome with concern about my date's welfare, for I was too busy dealing with the annoyance of being stood up, the perplexity that comes with any new and unexpected circumstance, and the encroaching fear of how I was going to get out of the restaurant without every patron looking up from their pasta and thinking, *LOSER!!* ...Oh, by the way, she was just fine, and none too bothered about leaving me in the lurch. And, you know, I don't think I ever went back to that restaurant, which doesn't matter because there was certainly not going to be another date.

The perplexities of a world that treats your expectations like a punch-line. Even the peace which passes all understanding is washed away when confusion floods your world, you know, those *what-do-I-do-now?* kind of days when some shock or accident or failure or calamity or tragedy or missed opportunity or disillusionment is the rug pulled right out from under you or the linebacker who's just knocked all breath right out of you.

“On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body ... they were perplexed about this.”

This isn't some “*Hmmm- isn't-that-curious*” kind of perplexity as if you caught a glimpse of an albino squirrel on the greenway. Nor, is this the “*Well, I know I put it here Friday*” kind of perplexity, as if the body of Christ was a missing set of car keys. Rather, besotted with grief, bereft of meaning and purpose after the death of the dream, still horrified by the sight of their teacher, their rabbi, their messiah nailed to a cross, these women have mustered just enough strength to slog to the tomb where they had watched Jesus be interred 36 hours earlier, so

that, like so many saints through the centuries, they could do the work that still needed to be done in order to honor the traditional burial rituals that had been interrupted by the Sabbath.

I have seen such saints so many times, grieving a death themselves, yet busily scurrying to and fro to ensure that a loved one is honored and that others find comfort in a time of loss. Cooking, setting up tables, collecting old photos, planning a service, writing cards, holding hands, organizing a visitation, a reception, a meal.

With Jesus' death, these women were grieving every bit as much as Peter, James, or John, yet not knowing what they should do, they focused on what they could do, and so as a sleepless night came to a welcome end, they collected the spices needed to complete the rites of burial for their crucified friend. They still believed in Jesus, but even the most fervent of followers don't fully comprehend what they repeat by rote and say they believe in. Perplexed? The women could not help but be perplexed even before the surprise of an open and empty tomb.

He's gone! Someone call 911! Call the police! Call Magnum P.I., Jack Reacher, Miss Marple, and Sherlock, but call someone because he's

gone! Jesus was dead. They were sure of that before wrapping the broken, lifeless body and placing it in a borrowed tomb. Friday's horror was not a nightmare. It was real. He was dead ... and now he's gone.

What makes for a great suspense movie doesn't really make for a great annual celebration. The symbol for Easter is an empty tomb, and it has been observed to be a little short on the pizzazz that would inspire the construction of Europe's ornate cathedrals. It wouldn't do much for our morale to gather today to stand and say, "He is gone! He is gone indeed!"

Christmas offers such royal pageantry. Star shining, angels descending, their voices rising in glorious song. Shepherds glowing with heaven-sent news celebrating the newborn king. Cattle lowing, kings gifting, carols ringing, parents beaming, child blessing.

But here at the empty tomb, we get ... an empty tomb. No fanfare, just a couple of guys in their glow-in-the-dark Halloween costumes who remind me of the dude at Target that doesn't like his job. "Why do you seek the living over here in housewares? That's some other

department. I don't know if we even carry that brand." Well ... do you think you could check for me or at least send me in the right direction?

Luke reports that suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. Doesn't give them credit for being angels or tell us where they came from. Their message doesn't even seem to be marked by any emotion. "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." ... duh!

Okay? The women seemed to remember something like that, at least the ones who were with Jesus back then, but these rent-an-angels offer no instruction and no promise the women will see Jesus. At least in Matthew and Mark, the stunned visitors to the tomb are given a plan. "Go, tell the disciples and get on up to Galilee. You'll see him there." But here in Luke? Nothing. No advice. No counsel. No instructions.

The women, already laboring in despair, now are blindly staggering back to town through a thick cloud of confusion, and the

disciples' response when the women tell them what happened? *Fake!*
Fake news! #Sad.

Is this any way to run a resurrection? Frederick Buechner said, "It doesn't have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of truth. If the Gospel writers had wanted to tell it in a way to convince the world that Jesus indeed rose from the dead, they would presumably have done it with all the skill and fanfare they could muster. Here there is no skill, no fanfare. They seem to be telling it simply the way it was. The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself. When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt." (Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*)

The beauty of such resurrection accounts as these is that their truth is not something to be proven, but lived into. Dostoyevsky said that in the resurrection, life replaced logic. Jesus Christ is raised from the dead. We tend to say it in a way that assumes it's common knowledge; something like saying, "Harrison Ford was in *Star Wars*." Everybody knows that.

Resurrection is something wholly other; incomparably odd; unprecedented; without parallel; epoch making. In so many ways, our world turns on veracity of this event. If it is not true, you're left with nihilism and nothing to stem the self-destructiveness of the self-absorbed life. If it is true, love wins. If it is true, even the irredeemable can't quite hide the flicker of grace alight in them. If it is true, then as Paul said, not even death will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Around this time of year, the cable channels clog with these theological detective shows out to prove or disprove some strand of the Gospel narrative. Intense and passionate narrators walk the dusty holy land in hiking boots, shirts with rolled up sleeves, and theatrical opinions. But I have to say, most of them come off looking like the old Monty Python sketch lampooning a documentary about the search for the source of the Nile; or worse, they possess a sad resemblance to one of those cheesy David Copperfield or David Blaine spectacles where they claim to make something like the Brooklyn Bridge disappear. To be honest, any of the discoveries *revealed* in these Jesus detective shows have most likely been known or debunked by scholars a hundred years

ago. Their revelations do nothing to foster or diminish my faith. For the truth of Jesus' resurrection will not be revealed through forensic evidence or Disneyesque light spectaculars above Jerusalem's temple, but in the lives of individual believers and congregations, who in spite of their own confusion or doubts, reveal life where you'd expect to find death.

When challenged about the Gospel's scandalous claims, William Sloane Coffin said, "I can report that in home after home I have seen Jesus change beer into furniture, sinners into saints, hate-filled relations into loving ones, cowardice into courage, the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. In instance after instance, life after life, I have seen Christ be 'God's power unto salvation', and that's miracle enough for me." (William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*) Similarly, N.T. Wright said, "Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven." (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*)

Look at Peter, one moment he's dismissing the women's rumors like a quarterback denying he listens to Barry Manilow, and the next moment he's hightailing it out to the cemetery to check out the tomb for

himself, and not long after that he's attesting to Christ's resurrection as the leader of the early church, and after that, he sacrifices his own life for the sake of the risen Christ.

Perplexed? Even doubtful? And yet, we come, some 2000 years later, hopefully asking, *Could it be true?* It is the same question on the minds of the women as they stepped out of the empty tomb. Then and now, the answer is not found in some grand spectacle but is seen in the simple lives of disciples and congregations where life and love have the power to supplant logic. Amen.