

Luke 24:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

21.04.19

### *An idle tale?*

The Gospel writer Luke, whose account of Jesus' resurrection we have read this morning, has one detail that is unique to him and missing in other accounts. It's the phrase that occurs when the disciples receive the news from some women that Jesus has risen, and we're told that they considered this 'an idle tale'. That's Luke's unique phrase and I want to consider it this morning.

These women, we are told, had gone at early dawn to the tomb where they had witnessed Jesus' corpse being laid a couple of evenings earlier. They had come to the tomb, after resting on the sabbath, to anoint his body with spices. And there follows the description of the stone rolled away and no body to be found, and the two men in dazzling clothes declaring, 'He is not here he is risen!' Immediately the women rush from the tomb to the other disciples and they blurt out their story. 'But', v.11, 'these words seemed to them an idle tale...' And there are two things to note about that phrase. Firstly, there is the word 'but' – 'but these words seemed to them an idle tale.' The word 'but' occurs twice in this passage as we shall see and it is an important word. The word 'but' introduces a kind of tension into a sentence, a sense of contrast: for example, 'I used to have hair – *but* now I'm bald'. Or, in this case, the women told the disciples their news - but they didn't believe it. The disciples had a big but - and my apologies here to American friends with us this morning for whom this word has a double entendre. The women told their story but to them it was just an idle tale. And the original Greek for the phrase 'idle tale' is very strong. It has the sense that the women seemed delirious, deranged, detached from reality. And of course they did. In Jesus' time the word of a woman counted for little. Their testimony was not accepted in a court of law – they couldn't be trusted. And incidentally and by the way, if you were making up the story of the resurrection – if you were inventing it – for this very reason you would never credit women with women being witnesses. You're asking for your story to be disbelieved, and the fact that women were the first witnesses is therefore a mark of the authenticity of the account, and of God's upside-down ways in which the first come last and everything changes. But the fact that the women's story was regarded as an idle tale also shows that people in that time were not gullible. We in our sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> century often regard people in

ancient times as credulous and prone to believing anything. But this shows that they weren't. They weren't stupid. They knew nonsense when they heard it. Many Jews in Jesus' day believed in a general resurrection at the last day when all the dead would rise, but the idea that one person, alone, would rise didn't fit with anything they believed. It made no sense. It was an idle tale. Idiotic.

Not, however, entirely. Not to Peter – and here we come to the second 'but' in the passage. After reading that the disciples believed the woman's story was an idle tale we read in v.12, 'But Peter got up and ran to the tomb...' Here again is the tension introduced by the 'but' word: the other disciples dismiss the women *but* Peter wants to check it out, to make sure. Maybe the women should be trusted! And so he runs to the tomb - and then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

When we turn to our other reading from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth we find something similar. People there were doubting the resurrection of Jesus. To them it was an idle tale and Paul is standing his ground: 'if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied'. In other words if this is an idle tale then we Christians are pathetic. And what comes next in this passage? Yes, that word again: but! 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead...!

Now note what is happening here: everything is reversed, everything turned upside down, inverted. The 'idle tale' turns out to be true and the claim that Jesus couldn't possibly have risen – well, it turns out to be the idle tale, the nonsense. There is an exchange, a reversal as what is claimed to be wrong turns out to be right and what was assumed to be indisputable and rock certain turns out to be wrong. Everything hinges on that word 'but'. And the Christian faith does this again and again. It pulls the rug out from under what is considered to be reasonable and rational and plausible. It reconfigures what constitutes an idle, idiotic tale.

So consider us this morning, Easter Sunday at the English Reformed Church in Amsterdam. For some centuries now our lives have been caught up in a story that we have been telling ourselves over and over again, and increasingly more and more people have been believing it. It's a story that really took off in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in the period we call the Enlightenment, and Amsterdam contributed to its rise, and it's a story that says there is no God, or if there is it is a detached and distant God who has no

involvement in the world or in people's lives. The real God, the God who is active in the world is Reason, and if we can only jettison all that religious nonsense then the world will come to its senses and we be led out of the dark night of superstition. And then history will be a tale of progress that will lead us to the sunny uplands of peace and prosperity for all. And that story goes on to tell us that the chief end of human beings is to shop, and that fullness of life consists in how much money you earn, and that society flourishes when it is single-mindedly committed to endless production and consumption. And we stop and we look at our world today, a world where terrorism rears its ugly head again, and where governments are in shambles; a world where people are deeply divided against one another and where climate change protestors throng the streets of London against a largely intransigent establishment – and we have to ask, is this really a credible story that we are following? This Enlightenment, western story of reason and progress and materialism and consumerism – is it really true? Is it not perhaps the idle tale?

Well, the raising of Jesus Christ from a grave outside Jerusalem makes that claim: the God who raised Christ is real and active in the world. There is that threadbare story we have come to believe – BUT there is another story, a better story, which renders that one an idle tale!

Two last points, briefly... thinking of that phrase, 'an idle tale' brought to mind a quotation from Shakespeare from his play Macbeth where, having heard that his wife is dead, Macbeth describes life as 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Well, if not just Lady Macbeth's but Jesus Christ lies dead then then Macbeth may be right. Life is indeed an idle tale told by idiots... signifying absolutely nothing. However - there is a big BUT: Christ is risen, alleluia, and everything is changed.

And lastly, what about your life? What story does your life tell this morning – what tale? Even apart from the pressures and the strains inflicted upon us by our frenetic, enlightenment world – and they are bad enough - life has a million other ways of declaring that your life is an idle tale: just a worthless, empty fiction to be dismissed and of no consequence. Well, if you have reason to feel that this morning listen for the Easter 'but': Christ has been raised from the dead. That verdict upon your life as an idle tale is subverted and undone. Christ is risen for you and he meets you here at this table. So come – and then, with Peter, go home, amazed at what has happened. Amen.

O holy God, loving God,  
God of the risen Lord Jesus Christ,  
We praise and worship you this joyful day.  
We come this morning with the women on the first Easter,  
with the burdens of life weighing us down,  
part of a good world and yet a crazy world where good people die  
and where violence seems always to have the last word;  
and we come as part of a world of bewildering beauty  
and yet with our sadnesses and our losses  
and our disappointments...  
and we come because we are looking for life.  
We have had enough of death in all its guises  
and we yearn for life.  
And so we come to you,  
but first we confess to you our failures,  
our betrayals, our compromises,  
our sins and our regrets...

O loving God,  
As we come this morning with the women on the first Easter  
may we find ourselves encountering good news  
that Jesus is risen;  
and may we meet him and worship him  
and hear him speak words of reassurance  
and of grace and forgiveness,  
and may we gather with him round the table  
and find ourselves feeding on him  
and finding new strength...