

“Dare to Care: Hope in Our Hearts”
Luke 24:1-12

The Easter story is a hard one for many people to get into, especially today where scientific information is at our fingertips. We get stuck on the details of figuring out how the resurrection happened or why it could not have happened. We forget the big picture of the story. The Easter story is ultimately about hope in the face of despair. Against all the odds of death, suffering and cruelty, it seems hard to maintain such hope. This kind of skepticism or cynicism is not new to human beings. This was exactly the reaction of the first followers of Jesus. Even though Jesus had talked about his resurrection with his disciples, they didn't seem to expect it, least not three days after his death. When we hear the Gospel story from Luke 24 today, we will hear that even the apostles, the early followers of Jesus, did not believe and thought what the women told them was just an idle tale. This was a charge the women would have been used to. It was the kind of stereotyping and degrading that was part of their experience as women.

But the women believed and were not afraid to proclaim their faith. Those on the fringes of society who were used to being discounted believed because they had mystical experiences that gave them the assurance of the resurrection of Jesus and that was enough for them. I love that the whole story of Easter depended on the witness of a few women. The ministry of Jesus did not come with the kind of power which people were used to. Jesus came as a humble servant of love who served his people and worked on their transformation so that they may in turn transform the whole of society. The same was true of his resurrection. There were no big signs in the sky, fireworks, or appearances of Jesus on the streets of Jerusalem so that all would witness and believe. Instead the story tells us that it was those who already believed who had those experiences of faith. Those who were already in his company of disciples were the ones to know and experience the resurrection.

The identity of the witnesses to the resurrection is essential to our faith. The resurrection of Jesus was very much like his birth: humble and accessible only to those who had the eyes to see. Those who were “wise” according to the standards of the world completely missed the power of his birth, his ministry, and his resurrection. They looked at the same events and saw what they were preconditioned to see. In the same way, Easter is about our ability to see and to know beyond what we are conditioned to see and know. The hope of Easter is not about an intellectual exercise of finding or providing evidence that Jesus rose from the dead or that we can fully understand what that really means. It is instead about the kind of hope that comes to us from a deep sense of knowing God's presence in our hearts and in our lives. Easter, much like the life of Jesus, challenges our assumptions about power, love, compassion, and life. Easter is not only about what God does but is especially about our human ability to see and know what God is doing in our lives. The women in the story of Easter were able to see beyond the limits of life and death into the spiritual realm of God and that changed everything for them. In fact, it changed everything for all the followers of Jesus.

And so this week, I invite you to ponder how you see and know life. Easter is an opportunity to open our eyes to the presence of God in ways we don't expect it: in silence,

in vulnerability, in brokenness, and in the company of those who open their hearts and lives to mystery. Once we are able to see God in such ways, everything changes. The values and pressures of the world don't get to be as powerful as they once were. Instead the values of God's love start to take hold in our lives. That is when we are able to live to our God given potential.

And so today, we will listen to several stories of hope and compassion that may seem to us like idle tales but through the eyes of faith, they help us see God's love in action in our world and in our lives. I invite you as you listen to them, to open your hearts to God's hope that is beyond the fears and limits of our thoughts and feelings.

The first story comes from our time. It is a story that took place on April 11 of this year. It is related to the struggle in South Sudan where there had been a civil war that killed at least 400,000 people and affected millions in that country. Last September, a peace process was started and as part of that process, the opposing leaders went to the Vatican for a two-day retreat. The resurrection story that I saw there was when Pope Francis got down on his knees and kissed the shoes of the government and opposition leaders begging them to stay in peace. Let's watch the video:

https://youtu.be/zY-KNuXo_k

This may seem like an idle tale on two counts. First, who would imagine the Pope to do such a thing? The second, who would believe that such an action would make a difference in the face of a long history of hate and violence? But there is power in such compassion, power beyond anything we can imagine! Those with the eyes of faith could sense the power of such a story.

Roula: Here are some other stories from the Bible and reflections written by Sally Foster-Fulton. You might be one of those who think they are also hard to believe. Listen with the heart of compassion to their messages of hope that defy fear, hate, and indifference.

Reading: Luke 8:40–42, 49–55

Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. ⁴¹ Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, ⁴² for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying.

As he went, the crowds pressed in on him.

⁴⁹ While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer." ⁵⁰ When Jesus heard this, he replied, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." ⁵¹ When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. ⁵² They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, "Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping." ⁵³ And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. ⁵⁴ But he took her by the hand and called out, "Child, get up!" ⁵⁵ Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat.

A young girl (Emily Rowe):

“I am the young girl from the story. When people first heard what he did for me, most thought it was an idle tale. The mourners at our gate even stopped their weeping to laugh and mock him when he said I was only sleeping. They thought I was dead, you know. I’d been so sick for so long that everyone said there was no hope for me. I lived from my bed and listened to whispers: ‘What a shame.’ ‘Poor little thing.’ ‘It’s God’s will.’ But it seems this Jesus had other plans for me: he was a man of life, not death. He took me by the hand and told me to get up, to eat, to live. And I did! And here I am to tell the tale. Who knows what my life will be? It’s a great adventure and it’s a gift. I can tell you one thing though: I won’t waste it or take it for granted. And I’ll always thank God for it. Jesus gave me my life back, so when I heard the ‘tale’ about him, I wasn’t so doubtful, because I guess I was kind of resurrected too.”

Reading: John 8:1–11

¹ while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴ they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

A woman (Elizabeth Clizbe):

“I am the woman who was caught in adultery. If I’d heard the story of what he did for me, I’d have thought it was an idle tale. Things like that just don’t happen in the real world. I’d been caught red-handed, as it were, and the fact that it takes two to tango didn’t seem to matter to the crowd at the temple – especially to the ‘holy men’. This Jesus was teaching a crowd. Everyone was listening to him, and I think that’s what had put the scribes and Pharisees in such a foul mood. They were out for blood, and if they couldn’t have his, mine would do. I don’t know who thought of it first, but I heard them whispering amongst themselves: ‘Take her to him.’ ‘Let’s see him get out of this one.’ ‘Let’s see what his God’s will would be.’ So they made me stand in front of all those people and they humiliated me. I was made to feel subhuman. They asked him what should be done with me. Should I be stoned, as the Law of Moses calls for? There was silence: he said nothing. Then he just bent down and drew in the sand. You could have heard a pin drop. Just as the silence was becoming unbearable, he stood up and said it. You know the words ... you’ve heard my story: ‘Let anyone of you who is without sin be the very first to throw a stone at her.’ And then it happened. They simply walked away: every single one of them, until I was the only one left. I just stood there. I waited. I needed something more, and he gave it to me.

'Has no one condemned you?' he asked. 'No one, sir,' I replied. 'Well then, neither do I. Go and sin no more.' He gave me my life back, so when I heard the 'tale' about him, I wasn't so doubtful, because, you know this? I was resurrected too."

Reading: Matthew 19:16–22

Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" ¹⁷ And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." ¹⁸ He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁰ The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" ²¹ Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²² When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

A young man (Dan Sunderland):

"I am the rich young man from the story. When folks hear what he said to me, most of them think that I was one of his rare failures. They think he didn't convince me or change me or save me. And I can understand that because, you see, I walked away. I couldn't handle what he had to say, what he asked me to do. I'd been a good Jew all my life: I followed all the rules as best I could. And I studied, and I listened. That's why I went to him in the first place. I'd been listening to him and I was intrigued by what I heard. I suppose I wanted to know what he thought of me. Maybe deep down I wanted him to tell me that I'd made it: that there wasn't anything else for me to do. But he saw straight through me. 'If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions. Give the money to the poor and then you will have treasure in heaven. And then after that come and follow me.' Talk about taking the wind out of your sails! I'm a rich man. I have a lot of things. So I walked away. I couldn't handle what he had to say, what he asked me to do. So people think I was one of his rare failures ... that he didn't convince me or change me or save me. Now, I can understand that, but there's a little point everyone seems to miss in my story. I went away right enough, but I went away grieving. And the grieving was the beginning of a change. It has taken some time, but I'm becoming convinced. I'm changing, and he did save me. Jesus showed me what life is really about. So when I heard the 'tale' about him, I wasn't so doubtful because I guess I'm kind of being resurrected too."

As Judy Cannato writes, "compassion changes everything. Compassion heals. Compassion mends the broken and restores what has been lost. Compassion draws together those who have been estranged or never even dreamed they were connected. Compassion pulls us out of ourselves and into the heart of another, placing us on holy ground where we instinctively take off our shoes and walk in reverence. Compassion springs out of vulnerability and triumphs in unity." May we have the eyes to see the power of resurrection each and every day! Amen.