

# “No Idle Tale”

a sermon by

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**Text: “but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11).**

**This past Monday evening I watched the Peter Jennings special on ABC entitled “Jesus and Paul.” It was, in many ways, a fascinating program with beautiful photography of the places central to the New Testament story. There were a number of well-known scholars representing a wide range of points of view about Jesus and Paul. The program was similar in many ways to the program presented on PBS’s series *Frontline* several years ago. In both of these specials, the scholars that are represented teach in divinity schools or in departments of religious studies. Whatever their personal religious convictions, and despite their presumed scholarly detachment, they belong to an intellectual and professional guild with a message that is becoming quite familiar. The message is that before something went wrong along the way, before there were institutions, before the creeds and dogmas, before there was a fixed canon of books that make up the New Testament, there was a truer, more authentic, more diverse, freer, more tolerant form of Christianity. There is a great reluctance today to acknowledge that institutional and**

creedal Christianity has proven more daring and diverse than its heterodoxies and that the Jesus of the church has outlived his rivals.

## I.

In a strange way that was true at the very beginning. Luke tells us that on that first Easter morning the women went to the tomb, found the tomb empty, heard the angels question them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” and then returned to the disciples. When the disciples heard their story, Luke tells us that it seemed to them an “idle tale.” The Greek word is “*leros*,” from which we get our word delirious.

Easter morning, I think, confronts us with a special problem. If there is one Sunday, where everything is on the table, this is it. The Apostle Paul put the problem very succinctly when he said, “If Christ is not raised from the dead, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain” (I Corinthians 15:14). N.T. Wright, a contemporary New Testament scholar, put it like this: “The bodily resurrection of Jesus isn’t a take it or leave it thing, as though some Christians are welcome to believe and others are welcome not to believe it. Take it away, and the whole picture is totally different. Take it away, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring the problems of the material world. Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is nothing more than wish fulfillment. Take it away, and Friedrich Nietzsche was probably right to say that Christianity is a religion for weaklings. Put it back, and you have a faith that can take on the postmodern world that looks to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche as its prophets; you can beat them at their own game with the Easter news that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than the human strength.

## II.

To say that Christ is risen is to say that life has meaning, that there is a purpose to your life and to mine. The Christian faith has always claimed that human life is not an accident, and that in, with, and under our lives there is direction, meaning, and purpose. Several weeks ago, when I was at Princeton Seminary, a group of us walked over to the university campus one evening to hear a well-known cosmologist lecture on “The Big Bang Theory, Stephen Hawking, and God.” In his lecture he said that physicists today can understand a great deal about the creation of the universe. He pointed out that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are all in agreement that the world has a point of origin; whereas, Hinduism believes that the universe has always existed and will always exist. The lecturer went on to say that physicists today can understand how there was a massive explosion that started the universe. In fact, he went on to say, they can trace it back almost to the very beginning. But there is one thing that modern physics cannot account for. They cannot account for the explosion itself, for it violates one of the greatest principles of physics itself: you cannot make something out of nothing. For him, the only way to explain the origin of the universe is that it has a creator.

Some years ago, when the archeologists first began their investigations of ancient Roman cemeteries, they found everywhere tombstones with seven letters on them: NFFNSNC. These letters represented an old inscription so familiar that the Romans put only the initials down, and these are the Latin words for which the initials stood: Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo. This is the translation: “I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care.” So sons buried fathers, and fathers sons; wives interred husbands, and husband wives; and over their graves this cynical, hopeless summary of life was put: “I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care.” Do you call that an expression of strength? Some would. I call it surrender, surrender to the forces of the world that are more powerful than any of our lives. I thought of those words when I was in Canterbury, England, and saw the grave of a great Christian, Dean Alford, on which were written the words:

“The inn of a traveler on his road to Jerusalem.”

### III.

To say that Christ is risen, is to say also that there is a force more powerful than death itself. Dr. John Leith in his book, *The Reformed Imperative*, observed that the resurrection is an answer to the problem of physical evil. Paul Tillich once observed that the *Crucifixion*, by Matthias Grunewald, is the greatest portrayal of the incarnation in visual art. The basis for this judgment is the sheer horror of the dead body of Jesus on the cross and the obvious anguish of those who stood at the foot of the cross. The painting puts in visual form the theological question of the incarnation: Can this man be the Son of God? Physical evil can be very devastating when we are confronted by the terrible power of earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes. It also affects us as individuals, when we face devastating illnesses such as cancer or other debilitating diseases.

One of the most powerful books that I have come across in the past year is a small book written by Reynolds Price, entitled *Letter to a Man in the Fire*. The book was written by Price in response to a letter he had received from a young man who was thirty-five years old and whose name was Jim Fox. He was a medical student who had to drop out of medical school because of a virulent and recurring cancer. This young man had heard of Price's own battle with cancer that is recorded in his book, *A Whole New Life*, and he wrote to Reynolds Price because he wanted to know if God existed and if God cared for his creatures.

Reynolds Price's book deals with two of the most basic questions that any of us can ask: Does God exist and does God care? Price goes on to say that through his own terrible struggle with a malignant tumor in his spine he came to the notion that there was a God and that this God did care for us. Price goes on to say that, “Long acquaintances with the text and tenor of the Gospels convinces me that the God who permits the torture and agonized execution of Jesus on Passover does literally restore life to him on Easter morning.” Price concludes that it is very hard for anyone to explain the Gospels apart from a belief that God raised Jesus from the dead.

#### IV.

Then, too, to say that Christ is risen is to say that the God whom we worship on this Easter Sunday is a God who is active in the world in which we live today. On Good Friday a good and innocent man, Jesus Christ, was put to death by a weak and vacillating governor by the name of Pontius Pilate and a conniving high priest, Caiaphas, and a howling senseless mob. On that Friday afternoon it appeared that the evil of this world had done its work. Jesus was dead, his followers had vanished, and it appeared that everything he had stood for had disappeared.

During the darkest days of World War II, Martin Niemoller, a German pastor whom Hitler had placed in prison, once published a very significant sermon in the midst of all the struggles in German, entitled "But God." In that sermon he pointed out that on Good Friday the forces of evil seemed triumphant. But God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and undid the evil that had been done. Niemoller went on to say that the Hitlers of the world, the Pilates, the Caiaphases must barricade themselves against a word that is spoken beyond the grave, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Today, we find ourselves facing a new enemy, the force of terrorism. In April 2003 the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, James Woolsey, spoke to a group of students at UCLA. In that address he said that we are today engaged in World War IV. If the Cold War was in effect World War III, then today we are engaged in a fight against terrorism, except that we are facing a different enemy, one who is not restricted by national boundaries, and whose face often we cannot see. This morning, even as we gather for worship, in Iraq and in Afghanistan, American fighting forces are engaging insurgents in those regions. Coupled with the terrible on going struggle between Israelis and Palestinians we find ourselves in a violent and frightening world. In the world in which we find ourselves today we desperately need to hear the message that this is our father's world and that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the God who rules and overrules all kingdoms, empires, and lands.

#### V.

Then, too, if God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead then the spirit of Christ is present in the world and that spirit is at work in your life and in mine.

The resurrection means that human beings can be forgiven and that they can be transformed. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church in Corinth, writes, "If any person is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has past away. The new has come. The resurrection proclaims that there is a new life possible for everyone one of us. If Christ has been raised from the dead, then those who live in great fear can learn to live with serenity. If Christ has been raised from the dead, then those whose lives are filled with self-centeredness and brutality can learn to be open to their neighbors and ready to forgive even those who have harmed them. If Christ has been raised from the dead, then those who this morning find their lives without meaning can come to understand that their lives

have a purpose. This transformation happened in the New Testament and it can happen today by the power of the Spirit of the risen Christ.

I agree with Reynolds Price that it is hard to understand the growth of the Christian church apart from understanding that something radical happened on that Easter morning, something that changed a wavering, vacillating, band of disciples into a force that changed the world. Something, in some strange way, gave these individuals a power that enabled them to achieve dignity, serenity, and grace in the midst of terrible circumstances.

One of the most moving stories of the persecution of the early church comes in the story of a young woman, who was eight months pregnant, whose name was Perpetua. She was persecuted by the Romans for her faith and executed in the city of Carthage in the year 203 A.D. Her father and the Roman governor plead with her to cooperate with the Romans and renounce her faith, but she responded by saying, "No, I am a Christian." On the day of her death Perpetua and her friend Felicity were marched from the prison to the amphitheater. As this young woman faced down the wild animals in the arena, a young gladiator was sent into the arena to kill her. The gladiator's hand was trembling so much that he was unable deliver the fatal blow. And at that point this young woman grabbed his hand and guided his sword to her own throat. She died, noted an onlooker, with authority, stature, and serenity.

Let us make no mistake about what it that we proclaim today. If Easter isn't good news, there is no good news. But if it is--if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed--then Easter Day, and the Easter message, is the true sun, which when it rises, puts all other suns to shame.

Amen!

