

Easter Sunday, St. David's, 4/17/2022, Luke 24:1-12 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

We've at last arrived at Easter, the holiest day of our Christian calendar. But holy doesn't mean pastels and bunnies and new clothes, or at least, that's not how we as Christians are called to observe the feast of the resurrection. The morning of Jesus' actual resurrection was messy and uncertain and confused.

The four gospels all tell the story a little bit differently. This year we are focused on Luke, so we heard his version this morning. The Sabbath was quickly approaching, and Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body and laid it in a tomb carved out of a rock. The women saw the tomb and the body and went away and prepared fragrant spices and perfumed oils, and rested on the Sabbath, in keeping with the commandment.

In the story we just heard, the women had returned to the tomb in the early dawn on Sunday morning with their spices. They planned to unwrap Jesus from his linen cloth and rub his body with perfumed oils and spices before wrapping him back up. Imaging them carrying jugs of oils and jars of spices, careful not to spill. Since this tomb was carved out of a rock I imagine a gravelly landscape like ones I know in Arizona. As someone less than graceful, I'm always endeavoring not to trip, and I don't carry breakable jars and jugs on rocky landscapes.

So that morning at early dawn, the women were overcome with sadness, and maybe distracted by what they were carrying, and finally they arrive to see the rock rolled away but no body inside. Just the linen cloths.

Because this story is so familiar to us, it's hard to stop and feel the dissonance, but try it. Take a moment. They tried to process what they were seeing. Had his body been stolen and desecrated by enemies? Had it been moved to a different location, and now they'd have to figure out where and haul all their jugs of oils and jars of spices to another location? Imagine how weary they must have felt, and how alarmed, and how disoriented. I wonder if any of them dropped anything in confusion or distress.

Suddenly, two men in dazzling clothes appeared, asking, Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

We hear those words every year, but imagine hearing them for the first time, in that place. They must have been confused, because they knew Jesus was dead. These women had watched Jesus breathe his last two days before, after saying "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Slowly, it all started to make sense as the men wearing dazzling clothes spoke. "Remember how he told you that he must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?" Then they remembered his words, Luke writes.

Imagine their return trip from the tomb. Now they wouldn't care if they spilled anything from the jars and jugs. Maybe they even left them behind. They couldn't wait to tell the eleven—eleven, because Judas, the betrayer, had died. But those eleven did not believe them, except Peter ran to the tomb and was amazed.

I find comfort in the confusion of that first Easter, because even today, when everyone dresses up and comes to church and beautiful children collect candy filled eggs, even then, Easter in church is a mixed bag. I remember Easter two years ago. We were shut down but a few of us gathered to livestream a service. I celebrated the Eucharist but only to create new reserve sacrament for the ambry, not to share it with the few people gathered or partake myself. I fantasized then about the next Easter, processing into a full church, singing with gusto, celebrating the pandemic being over.

Except that wasn't what Easter 2021 was like. We were only allowed a limited number of people. Even now, Easter isn't like three years ago. Last Easter Sunday we lost a beloved member of our church family, and five more members have died since then. A bunch of us are in the room, unmasked and singing, but Deacon Bill won't be standing next to me at the altar. Some things are better but some are not. Are we finally ready to resurrect after the pandemic, or are more variants and shutdowns coming? How will we know when the pandemic is completely over?

The women knew after the angels spoke that Jesus was alive, but the disciples did not. Peter had an inkling. Others did not believe until they saw him in person.

Those of us with serious health concerns also may have trouble grasping what's actually happening. For example, two years ago on Easter Sunday, I had just been diagnosed with lung cancer days before and was facing surgery to remove half of a lung, and after that was out for four months for chemotherapy. A year later, my scan showed no evidence of disease, and that felt like resurrection. But then the next scan six months later showed new nodules, and now I am considered stable, which is less exhilarating than no evidence of disease. So what's going on? How will I know when it's time to celebrate?

When they hadn't seen Jesus yet, how would they know when to celebrate? What does celebrating look like?

Even after they did see Jesus in the flesh, after all the women and the disciples all had seen the risen Christ, their life wasn't like it had been before. They were no longer following the man Jesus around, witnessing his miracles. They caught glimpses of him—on the road to Emmaus, or on the beach. But he didn't guide them in the same way. After the resurrection, all of Christ's disciples had work to do. The women went to the eleven to evangelize, as did the two men on the road to Emmaus, and then after Jesus appeared to all of the disciples and after his ascension, they all went on to share the good news with everyone.

These two thousand years later, we recognize the words of Luke's gospel as the greatest story we know, whereas when the women first came to the empty tomb, they were confused. When the eleven first heard the news, they didn't believe it. Now we know that death has been defeated. Celebrating isn't only gathering and feasting on Easter, but by sharing the good news by our actions. We can honor those women and the man whom they went to anoint that first Easter morning by going out from this place and sharing the good news—he is not here but has risen—with anyone who will listen. If they won't listen, we can share the good news by what we do. By our love.