



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



**An Idle Tale
Luke 24:1-12
Easter Sunday 2008
Rev. Dr. John E. Manzo**

Good Friday brought death and death often stands as the most perplexing of journeys for people.

Woody Allen, when asked about his work being an immortal legacy responded:

"I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying."

Sometimes we see reflections of people and their lives in their last words.

General John Sedgwick was a Union General during the Civil War. He was amongst the troops on top of his horse. The soldiers were warning him about Confederate snipers on the area. Sedgwick said, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist..." Famous last words.

Pancho Villa, the Mexican revolutionary wanted to leave some sort of a legacy in his last words but he couldn't think of anything. So his last words ended up being:

"Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something."

John Adams had a longtime feud with Thomas Jefferson. On July 4th, 1826 he was near death and lamenting the thought of Thomas Jefferson surviving him. Adams' last words were rather scornful, "Ah, but Jefferson lives..." Adams hadn't realized, however, on that same day, several hours earlier, Jefferson himself had passed away.

Some of the most amazing last words were uttered by the great preacher, Henry Ward Beecher when he said:

"Now comes the mystery."

Luke, of course, tells us that Jesus' last words were, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Which is where Easter comes into the story.

Jesus' last words didn't actually end up being his last words. And it is for this reason we gather and celebrate this day.

Luke's recounting of the story is a bit disquieting.

Several of the women go to the tomb early on Sunday morning and find it empty. Luke tells us that they encounter two men in dazzling clothes who tell them that Jesus has been raised and recount the story of Jesus' own words. The women hear the words, see the empty tomb, and remember all that Jesus had told them. So, they do the obvious thing and tell the eleven remaining apostles.

These women were not random women. They were part of the group that walked with Jesus every day. These women were people Jesus loved and who loved Jesus. They walked back and told their brothers what had taken place.

And the response of the apostles was not very kind. The words recounted are that the words 'seemed to them like an idle tale.' That's a kind translation. Luke's word, in Greek, was a lot more guttural. Luke's word was that this was utter nonsense, in fact, it was worse than utter nonsense, it was complete and utter trash. Actually, a direct translation makes it even worse, but we'll leave it at that.

The women hear the message and see that the tomb is empty. The apostles believe it is little more than an idle tale. Again, Luke's narration of this story is a bit on the disquieting side.

There are a couple of things that we are reminded of.

First, off, the story of Jesus' resurrection is unbelievable. The apostles who listened to the women and decreed what they had to say was an 'idle tale,' were stating the obvious. The story of Jesus being raised from the dead is unbelievable.

That is not to say that it shouldn't be believed; it is to say that the story itself is, in so many ways, unbelievable.

We often forget this. We have celebrated Easter our entire lives. We have heard the story over and over again to the point that we miss the real impact of the story and miss the real power of the narrative.

Having said this, we often believe in lots of things that, frankly, are rather foolish.

If I were to ask the question, "What did Nero do while Rome burned?," most people would say 'fiddled.' Nero wasn't in Rome during the fire, and, even more dramatically, fiddles had not yet been invented. But people believe that Nero fiddled while Rome burned.

If I were to ask how many legs does a centipede have, most people would say, "100." They really have between 20 and 30.

If I were to ask you what an ostrich does when it is afraid, most people would say that it buries its head in the sand. It doesn't. It does lower its head and often will lay its head on eggs to protect them, but the ostrich never does bury its head.

But people believe this stuff and often continue to believe that which is not credible no matter how much one demonstrates it.

My point is this. Jesus' resurrection is unbelievable and we need to recognize that when the apostles responded, they responded like most of us would have. But despite its unbelievability, it does not mean it is not to be believed.

Which brings me to the second point. We come to the belief because of faith.

Here is my great preference as to what I wish Jesus had done. I wish Jesus had come back to Pontius Pilate and tweaked Pilate's nose and said, "I'm back."

I wish Jesus had come back and walked across Herod's swimming pool.

I wish that Jesus would have preached a sermon during halftime at the Super Bowl game when the Jerusalem Giants defeated the Roman Patriots.

I wish Jesus had appeared in downtown Jerusalem and announced to the world that he had returned.

Instead Jesus appeared only to those closest to him. He returned in a way that we must rely on the testimony of those few who saw him. He returned in a way that requires us to live in faith.

And living in that kind of faith is so rich because it is from that faith, almost more than anything else, we find hope and comfort.

Last weekend Janet and I attend Janet's sorority's 35th Anniversary at Virginia Tech University. Last Sunday marked the 11 month anniversary of the shootings there.

On Saturday night, one of the young women in the sorority recounted the events of the day. She said that there were 120 women in the sorority and they spent two finding each other and getting each person back to their house to be together. Thankfully, all were fine. But they spent two hours together crying, praying, and caring for one another. They found that their faith got them through the horrors of the day. This year's reunion was their largest ever because so many of their sisters from year's past felt a need to come back and be together.

For them faith in Jesus Christ was not an idle tale.

Good Friday was a day of death, it was a day of despair. Easter was a day of unbelievable joy, of witnessing, and testimony to us here and now. It is up to us to embrace this day as a profound center of our faith or as a mere idol tale.