

# THE STORY STILL NOT BELIEVED

## Luke 24:1-12

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
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What did you expect when you came to worship today? I'll bet that most of you came with some expectations. You expected to see beautiful flowers. You expected a full sanctuary. You expected to hear certain pieces of music. If you had arrived today and we had not sung, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today", you would have been disappointed. If this happened to be the year no one donated Easter flowers, you would have been disappointed. That kind of disappointment might even be a deal-breaker for some of you. So much so that next Easter you would choose a different church for Easter worship.

Expectations are powerful. They influence us more than we often acknowledge. When a couple asks me to perform their marriage ceremony, I require them to take a premarital compatibility test. This test measures their relationship in about a dozen different categories. It tells them how well-suited they are based on the way they approach their finances, based on their self-esteem and their goals and their family history. There is one category in which almost every single couple scores badly. That category is called "Realistic Expectations." Routinely, whether a couple has been together six months or six years, they come to this time of wedding planning with unrealistic expectations. They are unwilling to admit, at least out loud, that there will be a time when they will face challenges in their relationship. They are unwilling to acknowledge, either to themselves or to each other, that they know that their feelings for each other will ebb and flow. It is then my job, as I work with these couples, to tell them the hard facts. That no couple stays in the infatuation phase for ever. That they will encounter difficult moments, and that they need to be prepared for them. Why do I burst their happy premarital bubble? Because realistic expectations are necessary for a healthy relationship. It's the couple

who expects things to be perfect all of the time that is the most at risk. If you think that your feelings will never change, and then you wake up one day and really look at the way your partner appears first thing in the morning...or notice some irritating quirk in him or her...or realize that they have faults you've never noticed before...some people panic at that moment. They are completely unprepared for the natural ups and downs and they think everything's over. Realistic expectations are important.

Jesus was not the kind of Messiah anyone expected. No one expected a political and religious rebel. No one expected that the Messiah would pay so much attention to the poor, or to women, or to those in need of healing. They thought the Messiah would be a respectable leader, not someone who hung out with fishermen and tax collectors.

And, even though Jesus tried to tell those disciples what to expect, they didn't listen. Every time he said, "The son of man must suffer and die," they tuned him out. They expected that they would have a long time with him. They loved being near him and they loved being in his spotlight. The disciples were popular, people looked up to them because they were in Jesus' inner circle. They never expected things to end the way they did. So Friday came, and it was a deal-breaker. They were completely unprepared to see Jesus put on trial. They never expected to see Jesus beaten. They were stunned to hear the crowds turn on him, full of jeers and taunts. And so they began distancing themselves from Jesus. Even Peter, who was so close to him, denied him. Not just denied being a disciple, but denied even knowing him. Three times.

On Sunday morning, the women go to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial. They find the tomb empty, and then two men suddenly appear, men, as Luke describes them, "in dazzling clothes." Angels, then. Messengers. And their message is, simply, "Remember?" "Remember? You should have expected this. He told you this would happen. Remember how he told you, when you were all together in Galilee, that the Son of Man would be handed over to sinners, would be crucified, and then on the third day, rise again?" And the women do remem-

ber. Filled with joy and excitement, they go back to Jerusalem where the disciples and all of Jesus' close friends are still gathered. They go back as the first evangelists, to share the good news. And what is the response? Luke describes it in understated fashion. Imagine how the women felt. They had this amazing news to share, the best news possible, news that would change the world. And this is what they were met with, as Luke puts it: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and the disciples did not believe the women." That's not quite the end of the story, though. Something is ignited in Peter. Guilt, maybe? Curiosity? Love? A vague memory of something Jesus said? He wants to see for himself. He runs to the tomb. The angels aren't there any more, just the empty linen grave cloths.

Somehow we, too, are people of unrealistic expectations. Unrealistic expectations which keep us from seeing the world as it is. We believe that the world should operate the way we want it to. According to a certain logic and our own sense of fairness. We believe that bad things should happen to bad people and good things should happen to good people. We believe that we should be able to understand all of life's events as if they were happening in a scientific lab. We like order, we like cause and effect. We like predictable. It's how we would have things go if we were in charge. And somehow we expect God to do the same.

So the first time that we realize that we live in a world of unpredictability, we go running. The first time we realize that bad things happen to good people, our faith goes running. We can't believe that God would allow terrible things to happen, so let's just be done with God altogether. We become apathetic, cynical, jaded.

The truth is that this is a world where both terrible and beautiful things happen. Terrible and beautiful things will happen in our own lives. Most of the time, they will happen without reason; they will not be able to be explained by science or logic.

It was the same way in Jesus' time and in his life. You might picture an idyllic existence for him, wandering around the countryside, patting children on the head, strolling through green fields talking to shepherds. But Jesus lived in an extremely volatile and difficult time. Besides

the political turmoil, it was a time when people were dying of diseases we have since cured. Those who lived with disabilities were forced to beg on the sides of the road. Terrible things happened. And beautiful things happened. It's the way life has always been.

If we could accept that fact, that this is the way the world is, if we could somehow stop expecting to understand everything with the rational part of our brains, I wonder if we could begin to see God at work in the world.

Wherever there is suffering, God is there bringing comfort. Wherever there is tragedy, God is bringing strength to the first responders. Wherever there is illness, God's healing power is working through those who provide medical care. Wherever there is evil, God is the presence of resistance. Wherever there is death, God is bringing new life.

On Monday of this past week, I began preparing the order of worship. I began to read my favorite liturgical words, my favorite words for Easter worship, phrases like, "Fear and evil and death do not have the last word." And then Tuesday, news from Brussels. Another terror attack. And I ask myself, "Do I believe what I'm going to say on Sunday? Do I believe that fear and evil and death will not prevail, are not prevailing?" I asked myself, "Can I somehow pretend that Brussels didn't happen, and just have Easter as usual?" And then, on Thursday, news of the death of a 37-year-old in the church family. And later on Thursday, news that a beloved daughter of the church had a heart attack. Do we believe that fear and evil and death will not prevail, that they are not prevailing?

For me, the word for Easter this year is the word, "Courage." Some years I have preached the word, "hope"; some years I have preached the word, "Love." This year, it is the word, "Courage." The word "courage" comes from the word "heart". When we pray for courage, we pray for God's heart to fill our own. We pray for the ability to connect to the spirit and energy of God's heart. We pray for courage to face the challenges of our own personal lives and the challenges of living in this world today. We pray to live like Jesus lived. He was well aware of the suffering that was part of his world, well aware that terrible things were happening around

him. He didn't ignore it or deny it. He faced it head-on. He loved the people who most needed loving. He confronted evil. He spoke against it. He resisted it. He called for its demise. And he did it all with joy. Because he also knew that beautiful things were happening in his world. People were being healed and given new life. People were forgiven and experiencing new life. Relationships once broken were being reconciled. People who had been walking in the shadow of depression were finding passion and recovering their will to live. The earth was springing forth with beauty only God could create. People were hungry for good news, thirsty for hope. They were flocking to him and soaking up his life-giving spirit. It was beautiful.

And all of those beautiful things are happening today, in our midst. Young people are discovering that the life of service is the best life possible; they will be the leaders of our future - it is a beautiful thing to see. In every country on the globe, at this moment, people are volunteering their time to help end hunger, cure diseases, increase education, bring about positive change, sometimes at great personal risk. It is a beautiful thing. In this very room today are people who have experienced new life in this past year: illnesses cured, babies born and children adopted, new relationships blossoming, faith revitalized, ministries started. God is at work, bringing hope where there is despair, showing forth beauty, creating joy.

Can we let go of the stranglehold we have on our expectations and see the world as it is? Because this is not an idle tale. This is the sacred story that can shape our lives in this world and in the world to come. I believe it and I want you to believe it. I want us all to live it. There is no other way to live. Let us live God-shaped lives, hope-shaped lives, lives that affirm, with eyes wide open, that fear and evil and death do not have the last word. They are not prevailing and they will not prevail. Because God gave Jesus the courage to live, and the courage to rise. And that courage is now ours.