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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 24:1-35; Psalm 98

8 May 2022

An Idle Tale

Opening Greeting/Prayer:

Please join me in prayer: Great creator and sustainer, we come to you again this morning, longing for resurrection, the new life that is possible in Jesus of Nazareth, raised from the dead, our hope today and forever. Open our ears and our eyes as we hear this familiar story another week that we would notice and hold with us what you are speaking to our community today. In Jesus name, Amen.

Message:

We have arrived at our final account of Jesus' resurrection in the gospel of Luke. We began our journey through these stories on Easter Sunday in the book of John, most likely the latest of the gospel accounts to be written. In that story, we reflected on how Mary Magdalene is the first at the empty tomb, the first to hear from the two messengers about the risen Jesus, the first to recognize Jesus at the sound of her name, and the first to share this whole experience with the other disciples that same day. Mary Magdalene is the first apostle. In a world that did not count her testimony or words as credible or believable or worthwhile, God's renewed people are heralded by her incredible words.

The week after Easter, we explored Mark's account of the resurrection, most likely the earliest of the gospel accounts. We left Mark's gospel account, marveling at the challenge before

us and before all who hear the message of the risen Jesus: will you see the empty tomb and believe; then what will you do about it? How will you respond to the risen King of the universe, the first of God's new creation breaking forth into our broken and distorted world?

Last week, we looked at the final chapter of Matthew's gospel. In Matthew's account, we hear the sustaining and life-giving presence of Jesus bringing hope and new life to the disciples who have lost themselves in the discouragement and hopelessness of a crucified and humiliated leader, the one who was supposedly going to free Israel from empire. We also hear the beginnings of other stories, other explanations for what has really happened, which is often a response when the unprecedented and unexplainable breaks into our experience. The powers that be, the ruling religious and political leaders in Jerusalem have built their entire existence on the threat of death, the power that death holds over our world. Any story or witness to the contrary, any word or good news that breaks or subverts their supposed authority needs to be quashed. Otherwise, their real powerlessness would be revealed... as it has been by the supposedly humiliated Jesus of Nazareth, now vindicated and raised from the grave. Jesus's words then at the end of Matthew sustain this first community as they have generations of the church, "I am with you always, even to the very end." We hold on in the face of the most difficult and intimidating circumstances because we know a God who surprises us with new life and hope even when we might be most ready to give up or give in.

Today, we walk with several people in Luke's gospel. First, we journey with a group of women, followers of Jesus from Galilee, who come to the tomb with spices prepared, continuing their grieving and attempting to make the best of an abysmal ending to this young leader's life. When they arrive, the stone has been moved from the tomb's entrance. Two men suddenly appear and tell them that Jesus has risen as he said that he would back in Galilee. The women's

confusion and fear turn to understanding as they hear these messengers' reminder of what Jesus had already said. They quickly head back to the eleven disciples in hiding and tell them what they have seen and heard. The disciples dismiss them, their story seeming like a fairy tale, and idle tale, the words of the crazed and bereaved who just can't cope with the realities of Jesus' suffering. Peter, though, runs to the tomb, confirms for the others that it is empty, and leaves amazed and perplexed.

Then Luke shifts the scene to a road, heading out of Jerusalem to the west and a little north toward the village of Emmaus, just a seven-mile walk. Two from the group of Jesus-followers have headed out, and Jesus joins them, though they do not recognize him. Jesus naively asks them what they're talking about, and they cannot believe that he could have possibly missed all that had happened over Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus's question stops them in their tracks as they hang their heads in sadness and grief. Cleopas finally speaks up but without giving too much away. Who is this stranger, and what does he want? Could he really not have heard, or is he a spy from the Sanhedrin, seeking out those who were with Jesus of Nazareth before his trial and execution? Jesus asks for more explanation, more clarity, more words from these travelers, and they begin walking again. They spill it all, the whole story, the overwhelming humiliation and shame of a dead leader at the hands of corrupt political and religious leaders, and the insanity of the story that the women have shared not too long before. Note that Cleopas changes the women's story: the women had actually seen men or messengers, not a vision of angels. Even though the tomb is empty, no one has seen Jesus anyway.

When they finish their story, Jesus responds, it seems, in exasperation and frustration with another story, a much older and more familiar story to them. Jesus begins in the Hebrew scriptures, unpacking how all that has happened was already written about the Messiah, about the

one who was to come and redeem Israel. When they arrive in Emmaus, Jesus continues walking as the other two find their place to stay, but they urge him to stay and continue his teaching. When they sit together at the table, Jesus breaks the bread and blesses their evening meal, and the two traveler's eyes are opened, their perspective changes, their whole world is shaken.

As Adam and Eve's eyes in the garden were opened when they ate the forbidden fruit, and awareness of shame, guilt, and death entered the world, so now the two at this table in Emmaus begin to see, but it is not the same sad story; it is the old story coming to its end in the new creation that God had promised. Jesus is here, raised from the dead, eating bread with them, yet he is strangely different. As they come to themselves in their amazement, Jesus has vanished from the table. The two travelers head back to Jerusalem, reflecting on how this mysterious encounter touched something deep in them, their hearts burning in response. When they get back to the other disciples, Jesus has appeared to Peter too.

Without the earthquakes of Matthew's gospel, the startling and abrupt ending of Mark's, or even the intimacy of Jesus' appearing at the tomb to Mary Magdalene in John's gospel, Luke draws us into the great story of God's new creation, revealed most clearly in Jesus' resurrection yet experienced in the simplicity of traveling along the road together, listening to each other's stories. sitting at the table, and eating together. Like these earliest followers, we often are startled, perplexed, or amazed when the risen Jesus appears to us or speaks with us in our daily walk. We do not have to go to a church building or some other sacred site to see and hear the resurrected Jesus. No, the risen Jesus comes to meet us at our tables, in our meals together, in our conversations, and through our hospitality as we welcome his presence on our life-roads.

But like the two at the table, we must be prepared for those moments when our eyes are opened, when we begin to see how resurrection has changed everything, has changed our entire

worldview, has brought hope and unending promise to every moment. The two on the road were not ready to see Jesus yet; they were overwhelmed by sadness and hopelessness, making the women's words that morning difficult to believe or even come to terms with. How often can our lives be like that? We hear of the power of death all around us; we might struggle to hear stories of people finding new life or turning their lives around or turning a new page in their lives as anything but unbelievable. Cynicism comes through most clearly when we say the oft-repeated phrase, "I'll believe it when I see it" because "talk is cheap." Is this part of the reason that the women's first words are discounted as only an idle tale, a seemingly hopeful delusion?

Our governments and institutions operate on the presumption of death's power. Our courts hand out mandatory prison sentences, our leaders use words like evil, bad, or criminal for those who disagree with them, and we even struggle to imagine what resurrection could look like for those who seem lost or beyond hope. Like the disciples, stories of resurrection happening around us can sound like idle tales, foolish talk, nonsense. Yet, we have witnessed resurrection in the yearly seasons and even in our own transformed lives. Each Sunday morning and in each new day, we celebrate resurrection because the hope that we see in the risen Jesus is our hope: that we are not beyond saving; that our fears and sadness and dismay on the journey are not the end; that life, yes even new life, in the midst of death and brokenness is possible. As the other gospels each have in their own way, so Luke does today, leaving us with the same challenge: Will you share this hope with your neighbors, your friends, even your enemies?

Closing prayer:

Let us pray: Risen Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Lord of this universe, we proclaim how your resurrection changes everything and brings us hope. We proclaim that evil and violence do

not have the final say, nor does their supposed power stop us in our tracks; we continue walking forward in your promise of new life, confident that neither death nor destruction hold the future, but you do hold our future in the promise of renewed heaven and earth. Amen