

Isaiah 25:6-9, Luke 24:1-12
“What an incredible story”

This past week one of the preschool classes stopped by my office while I was working on one of the 6 services this week. They each had a book and they stopped in just to say hi, they do that periodically through the week, and whenever they do it makes my day. Well, this week it made my Easter. They filed in this past week, jumped on the couch and were ready to file out when one little girl where her Dinkie the elephant book in her hand came up to me, holding it out like it was the most prized possession that she had. She said Pastor Bob, I have a surprise for you. And I thought she was going to show me her book, but instead she took the book away and said with a huge smile on her face: Jesus is alive, she then turned around and left the room with the rest of the class.

Now, how did she know that Jesus was alive and how did she know to repeat it when she did? I guarantee that there was a mom or a dad or a preschool teacher helping her to say and understand that Jesus is alive. How did she know Jesus is alive? She was taught, she learned, she believed.

Happy Easter everyone! Welcome to Easter Sunday here at First Presbyterian. How many of you have never attended an Easter Sunday service? Good, that’s what I thought. So you have already heard the incredible story that we are about to read in Luke. The story really hasn’t changed at all from when you were a little kid to today, no matter how old you are and how many years you’ve been worshipping here. And in just a little while you’ll hear it again in Luke.

So, if this incredible story doesn’t change, then what does change? The story teller changes, that’s pretty much about it. It continues to be an incredible story. And it is a story that Isaiah in our first Scripture alludes to when he talks about death being conquered, when he tells us of tears being dried. It continues to be a surprise, it continues to catch us off guard, those simple words that make up the incredible story that Jesus is alive. Today in Luke we find witnesses who tell the story, they tell the story to people like you and me, people who have heard it before, even people who walked with Jesus. But the story seems to be too incredible to elicit belief.

You see telling the story and even hearing the story doesn’t always lead us to belief, but tell it we must. Let’s hear the incredible story again.

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The whole time we were in Israel we were exposed to places and sights that had ancient stories attached to them. These stories were written in Scripture and have, like the Easter story, been repeated over the generations. But not all of the sights that we saw are considered to be 100% certain that this is actually where that story in the Bible took place. So if there was a traditional sight we called it a soft connection. For example, the pigs running into the sea, the sermon on the mount these were soft connections. For the sermon on the mount we even went to a place that we created that we felt could be a harder connection. The story felt more real there. But then there were other places that we went to which were hard connections. Capernaum, that was definitely Jesus' city, the valley of Elah, David definitely fought Goliath there. You knew the stories that you read in the Bible corresponded perfectly geographically with the place where you were standing. You were on holy ground.

Our last two days there we went and saw two different traditional or soft connection sights which claimed to be the place where Jesus was crucified and buried. One was called the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the other was called the garden tomb. They were night and day from each other. The first was mobbed with people, inside and out, so much so that we decided not to wait in line to go into an area thought to be the empty tomb. It was very, very hard to imagine that a place that should be so holy would have been so hijacked by us to create it after our own image.

We then went to the garden tomb and it just felt right. A hill off to the side that looked like a skull just like Luke 23:22 mentions. An obvious tomb that was set in the middle of the garden. It felt like it matched the story we had heard before, that incredible story became more and more believable. The guide said something profound there at the garden tomb. He said nobody actually knows if Jesus was crucified and buried and rose from the grave in the church in town or whether it was here. In fact, where it happened doesn't really matter. What matters is that it did happen. And it matters so much that we just have to tell the story.

Listen to the Easter Story again this morning. Jesus, the son of God, an innocent man, was crucified and put to death on a Roman cross for a crime he did not commit. This Jesus was God himself who chose to die in this way so that the story would end in a way that all of us could be redeemed and our sins washed clean by his innocent blood being shed. He died an agonizing death and was buried in a borrowed tomb, it wasn't even his, is the way the story goes.

But the Sabbath was at hand so the women who had followed our Savior couldn't prepare the body properly as they should, so they come back the first day of the week, early they came, so that no one would see them, early so they could carry out their life without being identified as a fanatic of his, just like the Samaritan women coming to the well at noon so as not to be seen by others, so they came to carry out this last act of respect in secret, but still they came. When they get there the rock that had covered the tomb, you know, that 500 pound rock they had no chance of moving and they hadn't really thought that far ahead, it wasn't there anyway, someone had moved it, the story goes.

This was puzzling. But they went in the tomb anyway, so that they could prepare the body, but it wasn't there either. The story in vs. 4 tells us that they were perplexed. We are used to thinking that the empty tomb would automatically elicit belief in the witnesses, but not here. An empty tomb does not translate directly to belief, in fact here the empty tomb leads to confusion, perplexity even.

The story continues and tells us that the two men in dazzling white appear and seem to chastise the women and give us the proclamation: he is not here, but he is risen. Or as the little preschool girl told me, surprise, Jesus is alive. It was a surprise and then some for the women to hear that he was alive.

But like us, they had been told by Jesus countless times that this would happen. Tear down this temple and in three days I will raise it up. They were told and in vs. 8 we read that after the angels tell them in vs. 6 and 7 "don't you remember, he told you: The Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again. Vs. 8, then they remembered his words. Then they remembered the story.

You remember this story, right? This incredible story. You've heard it before. Well, they went back to the disciples, the apostles, you know the ones who had for 3 years spent day and night with him, the ones who had heard the story even more than the women. They go back vs. 9 tells us, and tell the eleven and all the rest this incredible story. Surprise, Jesus is alive, just like he told us he would be.

But vs. 11 we find once again that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The disciples considered the story just that, a story, and they did not believe them. That's a problem. We get even more insight to the problem in vs. 10 because the Greek tells us not only

the names of the women involved, but that they kept repeating the story to the apostles over and over again. Jesus is alive.

Easter is the day that we hear the story again, just like the disciples heard it again. But it is one thing to hear the incredible story, and another to hear it and consider it credible, and actually believe it. If the apostles, those closest to Jesus, heard it from the mouth of the women, we really have our work cut out for us. Their misunderstanding is inconceivable. Even Peter is depicted as being curious, peeks in and then leaves amazed, not filled with faith and a believer. What does it take, how many times do we need to hear the story? For the disciples it takes Jesus appearing on the road to Emmaus, and then later in the upper room, and then along the Sea of Galilee with a fish bar-b-que for his beloved disciples to believe. It took telling the story over and over and over again before they could believe.

I love to tell the story. I have to tell the story. So this year, you have me to tell the story, and it is one that I believe. It is one that has made a difference in my life, it is one that has sustained this church and it is one that has changed your lives.

The world in which we live considers this story and idle tale and at times it can harden us and make us forget it so that we have to be reminded, again, and again. Emily Ott was back in the hospital and what the doctor didn't tell them until yesterday was that she was convinced that after seeing Emily and after seeing some test results that the Hodgkins had come back, she said I was 100% convinced. But after a Pet scan and other doctors got involved they were amazed because upon closer inspection, and as Tim states after 1,000 prayers, they have completely ruled out hodgkins.

It is an incredible story what Jesus has done and continues to do for us, but we forget it don't we, when life gets in the way. This is why every Sunday whether you like it or not as long as I'm around you're going to hear it again and again. Today, I don't know how hearing it again will affect you. I pray you'll remember who Jesus is and that will translate to action and cause you to reset your priorities and put into context that which is important and should come first in your life.

Or you may hear it again this Sunday, and just consider it an idle tale, you're in good company if you do, but the longer it takes you to believe in the story, the less you get to spend time with the same resurrected Jesus here and now. I pray you'll believe this incredible story on this side of life so you can experience all that Isaiah refers to here and now.

I have a surprise for you, for all of you, and it is a surprise that if you believe it will give you eternal life, purpose in life, it will fill you with a reason to live. Jesus is alive. That's an incredible story. Amen.