

Covenant Word

You Just Can't Make This Stuff Up

Psalm 118:14-24; Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-12

*A Message by
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Pastor
Easter Sunday
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We left all the other ministers behind at the Saint James Hotel located at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The privilege fell to me to drive Katherine Tucker Windham to her small house on Royal Street. It was the very house in which Jeffrey, the famous Alabama ghost, had revealed himself. Katherine, ever the night owl, enticed me to talk awhile over pie and coffee. We sat at her Formica and aluminum kitchen table. "Those stories you told tonight," I said to her, "You shine them up a bit before telling, don't

you?" Kathryn leaned across the table and with a gleam in her eye and said, "Oh, Sarah, the truth is what we tell because the truth is good enough on its own. You just can't make this stuff up!" And then she launched into a story to make her point.

It seems that a scaled-down version of The Passion Play, usually performed in Oberammergau, Germany, was touring the United States. There was a booking at the Fox Theater in Atlanta and then an entire week lapsed before the company was to be in Jackson, Mississippi. The agent began looking for a spot in-between where the play could be enacted for a weekday audience. Intrigued by the history of Selma, the agent felt it to be the perfect location to stop. The Arts Council of Selma, of which Katherine was a member, put pressure on the Mayor to agree. He acquiesced only because the revenue generated from ticket sales would be split 50/50.

The Arts Council got busy immediately because there were 52 extra roles that local people needed to fill. All the costumes were provided by the traveling company, but there would be no time for a rehearsal. The agent assured the citizens of Selma that a rehearsal was really unnecessary, because the professionals all knew their roles well, and the stage manager would be available to tell the locals where to stand. The high school auditorium was reserved for a Wednesday matinee performance for all the sixth graders from across Dallas county. There would also be a couple of evening performances.

Everything was set, except, before the time of Google Maps, the distance between Atlanta and Selma was miscalculated. The players, sets and wardrobes all arrived late to the auditorium. The set was hastily assembled and the thespians hurried to get into their costumes. All things considered, the Passion Play went smoothly until it was time for the crucifixion.

When the actor, playing the part of Jesus, saw how the cross had been assembled, he balked. Pointing to the cross, he told the stage manager, "I am NOT getting on that thing. It looks dangerous."

The stage manager heatedly replied, "Oh, yes you are! It's the same cross you are always crucified on!" Then, he pointed at the two Selma residents chosen to be the two thieves. "Look! They are already on their crosses!"

But "Jesus" was adamant. "I AM NOT GETTING ON THAT CROSS!"

"You will do as I say!"

"No, I won't!"

"Yes, you will!"

The bewildered extras watched as the argument escalated into a knock-down drag-out fight between

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"Jesus" and the stage manager. As if on cue, the school bell rang to signal a class change as Jesus finally broke free from the stage manager's strong hold. Barefooted, wearing only a loin cloth, his face bloodied, Jesus ran through the high school halls among all the sophomores, juniors and seniors screaming, "They are trying to kill me! They are trying to kill me!"

"Jesus" ended up in the principal's office.

Meanwhile, back in the auditorium, the sixth graders waited patiently. The taped musical score was on its second repeat. The stage manager gathered his wits because, as we all know, the show must go on! There was no understudy in such a small troupe. His only option was to choose another actor from the cast. So the stage manager ordered Judas Iscariot to strip off his robes and go up on the cross. Judas, however, did not own a loin cloth. Under his robes, he was sporting gym shorts with orange stripes. He also had two prominent tattoos. One read "Mother," surrounded by a sentimental wreath of roses. The other was a U.S. Navy anchor. To top it off, Judas had a head full of recognizable bright red hair. So



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when the curtains finally opened, the sixth graders gasped loudly. Some even shouted the obvious, "They have crucified the wrong man!"

Katherine laughed and laughed! She assured me, "The truth is good enough. You can't make this stuff up!"

The disciples think the women are making up stories, because the disciples cannot handle the truth. "These are a bunch of hysterical women," they think. "They are telling us an idle tale!" Idle. Made up. A "polished" story to suit their own need for an explanation of Jesus' disappearance. But the women insist. They keep telling the truth.

They had been there all along, you know. Not just to hear the teaching; not just to watch miracles unfold with the lepers, blind and lame; not just to hear the arguments with the scribes and Pharisees; not just to support the movement with their money; the women are present during the suffering and dying too. They are with Joseph of Arimathea as he lays the body of Jesus in his rock-hewn tomb; as he wraps Jesus in a linen shroud; as the stone is rolled into place to seal the tomb. They are present out of loyalty and love not because they are vying for a privileged position on the right hand side of Jesus. No, they know their place and that they have only one acceptable job: to prepare spices and ointments for the body. They know their duty is to perform a decent act for someone who has been treated indecently.

On the Sabbath, they all rest according to the law. It strikes me as ironic that as they rest and grieve, as they find solace in community with one another, that the greatest miracle is happening in that small tomb in a garden across Jerusalem. The truth is that none of us knows exactly when it happened or how it happened, because there are no hosts of angelic choirs; no stars exploding with light in the sky; there is not a single soul around. It is so beyond our imaginations that scripture doesn't even try to offer an explanation. Frederick Buechner says of it: ("The Secret in the Dark," p. 253, Secrets in the Dark)

[The gospel writers] are not trying to describe it as convincingly as they can. They are trying to describe it as **truthfully** as they can. It was the most extraordinary thing they believed had ever happened, and yet they tell it so quietly that you have to lean close to be sure what they are telling. They tell it as softly as a secret, as something so precious, and holy, fragile, and unbelievable, and true, that to tell it any other way would be somehow to dishonor it. To proclaim the resurrection the way they do, you would have to say it in whispers: "*Christ has risen.*"

Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen which is why it helps me to remember that no one saw it happen on Easter morning either. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Escape from the Tomb," The Christian Century, 4-1-98)

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Not having an eye-witness, however, has not stopped scholars from trying to surmise what might have happened. Some believe that Jesus came out of coma, regaining consciousness in the cool of the tomb. Others believe the disciples, crushed that his execution was as a common criminal, got together and made it up, creating a myth to

support his words. But think about it: nearly all these disciples live and die for being a follower of Jesus. Do you give your life for a myth you make up yourself? (John Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago, "Let Us Walk Through the Door," 4-24-11)

Scripture even supplies us with a conspiracy theory in Matthew's gospel. On the Sabbath, when everyone is resting...no shops open...no trade occurring in the marketplace, Pilate's peace is interrupted by the religious leaders again. This time, we see how small and scared the Pharisees and scribes are. They have suddenly realized: what if there was a little God present in Jesus? What if Jesus is actually resurrected? What if the body disappears? What if they are accused of killing the Messiah? Oh, these old frightened men, having unsuccessfully nailed their control on the cross, come now begging for guards and large stones to contain the Jesus movement. They are afraid that what Jesus spoke will occur, yes! But they are also afraid of the truth: that Jesus will walk out of the tomb with God's own breath in him and that the world will be suddenly, dramatically, magnificently new. (Buchanan)

And so, on the Sabbath, in the quiet, with the security of armed soldiers, the mystery of resurrection takes place. The resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus' life that is entirely between him and God. There are no witnesses whatsoever. No one can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one, on earth anyway, was there. They all arrive after the fact.

Interestingly, all the gospels agree that it is the women who come to the tomb. Historians believe the presence and testimony of the women is such an embarrassment to the early believers that it only adds to the credibility of the story. The writers disagree on their names and the number, but they all agree that the women – those whose testimonies were never allowed in

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court because (and I am quoting Josephus here) “because of the levity (flightiness) and temerity (audaciousness) of their sex!”

It is these unreliable women who assemble to ward off death’s indignities. Luke’s gospel names Mary Magdalene, JoAnna, Mary the mother of James, and then a generic “other women.” When they arrive, the stone is rolled away. The body is gone. Angels make an appearance to remind them of Jesus’ words that after crucifixion, he would rise on the third day. In remembering, they return to the 11 disciples to tell them about their experience at the cemetery. And the disciples do not believe them. “This is an idle tale,” they say. They do not recognize the truth when they hear it. They do not know that truth like this just can’t be made up!

Apparently, the chrysalis of the tomb is too confining for Jesus. And if it is too confining for Jesus, it is certainly too small a focus for our understanding of resurrection. It seems the Risen One has people to see and things to do. Jesus’ business is among the living to whom he keeps appearing: on the road to Emmaus, in the room with locked doors (not just once, but twice), on the shores of the Sea of Galilee where he fixes his friends breakfast, and on a mountain top giving last instructions. Every time Jesus comes to his friends, they become stronger, wiser, kinder, braver and more daring. Every time Jesus comes to them, they become more like him.

It is the change in the followers that confirms the resurrection for me. What happened in that tomb is entirely between Jesus and God. For the rest of us, Easter begins the moment the angels challenge the women to remember. “Why are you seeking the living among the dead?” they ask. And the women respond boldly by stepping out of their culturally and religiously defined roles to tell the sleeping men that Jesus is alive.

That, my friends, is how the miracle of resurrection happens and goes on happening. It does not happen solely in the tomb, it happens when our encounter with the living Lord is so profound that we, and others, are changed. And so wounded friendships become whole; a freed person walks out of jail; we find the courage to love one another; a peace treaty cancels out war; a seedling takes root where a fire has raged; grief becomes joy and we gather our fortitude to live with chronic illness in peace.

Resurrection is never finished for there are always the fearful in need of comfort; the lonely who need a friend; the homeless who need shelter; the hungry who need a meal. Easter lives in the places where justice is done, love abides, and peace reigns. (“The Unfinished Story,” Tracey Lind, [Interrupted by God](#)) Easter just needs people like you and me who are brave enough to keep believing and telling a true story that we could never make up on our own.

Just as we watch those early believers become bold and daring, we know that resurrection is the extraordinary ability of God’s

creation to rise again. It is the resiliency of life and the rebirth of love that is simply beyond explanation...stories so amazing we know they cannot be made up because the truth is good enough to stand on its own. And the truth this day is that God has not abandoned us. Jesus is alive! Thanks be to God! Amen!

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