

"BUT SOME DOUBTED"

A Sermon
By

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First Sunday After Easter
April 2, 1986
Park Avenue United Methodist Church
New York City, New York

"BUT SOME DOUBTED

INTRODUCTION Monday morning quarterbacks can usually come up with good excuses for losing a football game. Here's one that you may never have heard. It helps to launch today's post-Easter sermon.

Back in 1980, Baylor played a game on the home field of TCU - Texas Christian University. Now TCU didn't have much of a team and a victory against any opponent that year was a victory cherished. Baylor, on the other hand, had a good team and a win that day for Baylor coupled with a Texas University defeat would give Baylor first place in the Southwest Conference.

The TCU coaches did everything they could to get the team "up" for the game. And by the end of the third quarter, TCU was losing by 7-6, but they were playing their best game of the season. Time was running out, the crowd was cheering, and TCU was marching down the field for the go-ahead touchdown. The team spirit was high and the TCU fans sensed an up-set victory over Baylor, but then it happened. What happened?

Bob Barry the TCU announcer was handed the results of the SMU-Texas game. SMU had upset Texas 20-6, and so he announced the score. Everyone in the stadium heard the score, especially the Baylor team on the field who now knew that if they would win their game they would be in first place in the Southwest Conference.

On the next play, a TCU quarterback dropped back to throw his go-ahead touchdown pass. But Baylor intercepted the pass and scored a touchdown six plays later. Even though little time remained on the clock, Baylor went on to win the game by the score of 21-6. The TCU players saw no victory that day. So close, but then it got away from them.

The TCU Athletic Director, Frank Winedegger, was so upset that he fired the public address announcer on the spot, blaming him for what happened. He said,

"At that point in the game, Barry used extremely bad judgement to put that out over the PA. It boosted Baylor's spirits. I would have held the announcement until our game was over. Barry's done a competent job over the years, but he blew this one!"

DEVELOPMENT Being a sports' announcer is no easy job. You have to know what to say and what not to say. Announcers can affect the tempo and spirit of a crowd. We know that. They're not employed by the Fairness in Media Union; they're employed by a particular school or team. What is said can have an impact upon the players - on their determination and enthusiasm. An announcer is supposed to help, not hurt, his local team. And if he hurts it, he won't be rehired. Bob Barry learned a hard lesson that day; it cost him his job.

The question that comes out of this is: what do you do with the truth once you've got it. That's not an easy question. Sometimes there are no easy answers. Today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel asks the same question: what do you do with the truth once you've got it? Let's take a closer look at the story - this post-Easter account.

A LOOK AT THE STORY

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to the tomb of Jesus. It's Easter morning and suddenly, there's an earthquake and we read that,

"An angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning and his raiment as snow."

The guards of the tomb were present. We forget them. The story reads, "And for fear of him - the angel - the guards trembled". So what did the guards do? They were so afraid that they played like they were dead and fell to the ground. The angel told the women to not be afraid. He said that Jesus was risen and that they could see Him. And then the angel concluded,

"Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead and behold, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him."

So the two women left the tomb and ran to tell the Disciples.

Meanwhile, the guards had seen and heard everything. They rushed back to the city and told the whole story to the chief priests. Notice here, that the guards did not go tell the political authorities this news. No, instead, they went back and told the religious authorities. The story continues with these facts:

"And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sum of money to the soldiers and said, 'Tell the people that His Disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.'"

Since the guards fell asleep on the job, they could be put to death. And so the chief priests said,

"And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble". (Matthew 28: 14)

What did the religious authorities do with the truth, once they got it? They covered it up! That's what they did. They didn't want to hear this story about an angel that talked or a Jesus who was risen. Such truths threatened their status quo. It would be better to deny this truth and keep a lid on things. Concealing the truth was simply a matter of price for the religious authorities. So they paid off the guards and circulated their own story.

But this morning's story has still one more hitch. As the Disciples were going to Galilee, Jesus appeared to them. Other people began to gather. He spoke with them. And the story finally ends,

"And when they saw Him they worshipped Him, but some doubted"

Some doubted. Who were they? We don't know. We don't know who or how many doubted and we don't know how many believed that this was Jesus, and that He was alive. But here again, people were presented with the truth. And yes, some believed and others doubted.

Back to the question: What do you do with the truth, once you've got it?

WE USUALLY BELIEVE WHAT WE CAN AFFORD TO BELIEVE

Now...no single reply
can completely answer

that question. So my message today does not exhaust the variety of answers that could be given. But I'll give you this one ...try it on and see if it fits.

I think in life that we usually believe what we can afford to believe. The guards could not afford to look irresponsible, so they had to spread the rumor that the body of Jesus had been stolen. The religious authorities could not afford to be outdone by Jesus, so they spread the rumor that a dead man had stayed dead; He had simply been moved to another location. And when Jesus appeared before His Disciples and the crowd that gathered, some doubted. The ones that doubted probably did so because all of this was a little too much to comprehend. They were confronted with more than they could understand or deal with at that moment. Isn't it true: we usually believe what we can afford to believe.

We can't afford to believe the whole truth. Usually, we settle for just a part of it. Sometimes the truth heals us where we have been broken. But the truth can also bump us in the night and that can hurt. Listen...here's how Erma Bombeck explains her moment of truth.

"I don't cheat on my income tax. I don't lie about my age on my driver's license. I don't tell my dentist I floss when I don't. So how come I have trouble looking honest?"

I content you can always tell when a person is lying. He looks you directly in the eyes and with a sincerity that belongs in the pulpit says, 'You can believe me'. Maybe it's because people have more riding on a lie than they do on the truth.

I try too hard with the truth....especially when I bear the burden of it. When my husband asks, 'How did that dent get in the car door?' I approach the car...a little stiff-legged, a little hesitant. Don't be too quick to find the spot...nor too dumb to recognize it when you see it. Now, run fingers over it slowly, clear your throat, and say in an even voice, 'I don't know. This is the first time I've noticed it. Who could have done such a thing. I didn't do it. I certainly would have remembered. Did someone say I did it? They lie!'

Don't talk too much. Go for more indignation. 'That's a terrible thing to do and then run'. Look him in the eyes; He's getting suspicious. 'I suppose I could have done it, but...'. Ten minutes later, I am making a full confession for something I didn't do.

Honesty...it's painful. Trust me. You have to believe that.

IT COSTS US DEARLY TO BELIEVE

If the Easter story is simply about a stone that rolled away, then it's not much of a story. If the Easter story is simply about an empty tomb, then it's only another magician's story. If the Easter story is simply about a man, even a

good man, who was raised from the dead, then it becomes a once-upon-a-time story, with a happy ending. Some of us might doubt the plausibility of these events, but most of us will believe them true, because we can afford to believe them as true.

BUT CAN WE BELIEVE

But can we believe that the rocks of our tombs can also be moved? That we can exit the inescapability of our misfortunes and dilemmas? That the dead or dying parts of ourselves can be risen...given new life, new hope? Can we afford to believe this truth? How much will it cost us and can we afford not to believe it?

It will cost us every excuse we use in not trying to make this world a better place. It will cost us every attempt to condemn this world because it has not treated us justly. It will cost us our prejudice and even our pride. It will cost us every attempt of trying to understand God with our heads, yet not with our hearts. It will cost us our singularity. But most of all, it will threaten us with the edict that if we grow as individuals at the neglect or expense of those around us, then we grow not only away from God but away from our true selves, whom we may not ever come to find. Some will doubt because they cannot afford to believe.

We've heard about such things as love and acceptance, and forgiveness and hope and compassion and trust. Such nice words. But now, with not only an empty tomb and a risen Lord but with a Lord who meets us along the path of life, who finds us as we journey to Galilee or somewhere else, who knows where we are and comes to us...now these words take on different significance.

If the dead can come back to life, then surely those who are alive can love and accept and forgive and hope and express compassion and truth and caring. Surely...it costs us to believe...it costs us dearly to believe. And it costs us nothing to doubt.

CLOSING

Perhaps this is what Thornton Wilder, author of Our Town, was getting at with his story of the day-to-day life in a little New England village. In one scene, after her death, Emily, the young girl, learns that if she wishes she can return to life again. She selects what she thought would be a happy time - the day she celebrated her 12th birthday. But as special as that day was for her, when she went back she discovered that nobody really took time to notice her.

"Oh, Mama, just look at me for one minute as though you really saw me. Just for a moment, now that we're all together, let's look at one another!"

Maybe the biggest miracle of all was not that Jesus Christ was raised, but that when He appeared before the Disciples, they dared to look at Him. It cost them dearly to believe. And it would have cost them nothing to doubt. But they learned to believe more than what they simply could afford to believe.

They looked at Him. They even learned to believe that God believed in them. Some doubted, but some even believed. I wonder...can we afford not to believe? What about you? And you? And you?

PRAYER We thank Thee, O God, for life with all its wonder and beauty and power, and especially for the life of Jesus as we see Him revealed to us in this Easter season....on a day like this when the limitations of time and space are set aside and He comes to us and dwells among us as love and power and wisdom.

Help us, O God, so to order our lives that the weight of our interest may always be on the side of eternal things, and when it comes time to gather us together unto your Kingdom of light and glory, we shall know whither we are going. We ask these things in the name of Jesus who on Easter was raised from the dead to new life. Amen