

"IDLE TALE OR ETERNAL TRUTH?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 26, 1989

"IDLE TALE OR ETERNAL TRUTH?"

TEXT: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale,
and they did not believe".

(Luke 24: 11)

INTRODUCTION

Over a thousand years ago, a Spanish kingdom was under attack by foreign invaders. For many years, one small fort withstood all assaults, thanks to a remarkable leader called El Cid. When El Cid died, his followers came up with an idea. They dressed up his body in all of its armor, tied a sword in his hand, and placed him on his horse. And with El Cid's body in the lead, the Spanish forces charged. But they were quickly defeated, for this act fooled no one. Their desperate trick collapsed. El Cid's followers quickly surrendered to despair when their plan failed.

I suppose there will always be those who insist that this was the strategy of the early Church - a dead leader, dressed in armor, propped up on a horse with a sword in hand. It reminds one of what the Chief Priests said to the soldiers following the resurrection of Christ:

"Tell people that His disciples came while you were asleep and stole His body. That way if the story of His disappearance reaches the governor's ears, you won't get into trouble".
(Matthew 28: 14)

Thus from the very beginning, the explanation was advanced that the disciples had stolen the body of Christ in order to invent the story of His resurrection. A dead body dressed in armor, sword in hand, and mounted on a horse.

And never has a less satisfactory solution been proposed to a difficult mystery. The reason this explanation was not persuasive then is the same reason it is not persuasive now. It simply does not fit the facts. Let's review some of those facts this morning concerning the resurrection of Christ.

THE GENUINENESS OF HIS FRIENDS' GRIEF

To begin with, let's consider the genuineness of His friends' grief.

Never has there been a more demoralized group of believers than that tiny band of followers after the events of Good Friday. Only the women were brave enough to mourn Him in public. The men were all in hiding...fearful that the Roman soldiers would next come for them. They were obviously stunned by the sudden turn of events. In one week's time they had seen their leader go from being cheered on His entrance into Jerusalem to being crucified between two thieves. "We hoped that He was the One to redeem Israel..." they had said to a stranger on the Emmaus Road. But now He was dead and so were their dreams.

We can understand that. We, too, have difficulty accepting our own mortality or the death of a loved one. We can appreciate the feelings of a little girl who wrote a letter to God that went something like this,

"Dear God,

Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you've got now?"

We wish that God worked like that, but He doesn't. The under-takers of this world all sign their letters, "Eventually Yours". We don't deal with that fact very well, do we? As Woody Allen once said,

"It is impossible to experience one's own death objectively and still whistle a happy tune."

Which reminds me that someone posted an article on an obstetrical floor in a nearby hospital which said,

"Recent research shows that the first five minutes of life are very risky." And someone scribbled underneath it, "And yes, the last five minutes aren't so hot either".

In the Broadway play, The Best Man, the plot centers around the struggle for the Presidency. An aging, ex-President asks one of the candidates, "Bill, do you believe in God?" Bill stiffly replies, "I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church". "That's not what I asked" says the former Chief Executive. "I'm a Methodist and I'm still asking you if you believe in God and a day of judgement and a hereafter?"

The ex-President goes on to confess he is dying of cancer,

"I tell you, son" he says, "I'm scared to death...I don't fancy being just a pinch of dust." The young candidate tries to console him by reminding him that the good he has done will live on...to which the older man replies, "I suggest you tell yourself that when you finally have to face a whole pile of nothin' up ahead."

We don't deal very well with the idea of death, do we? I read recently about a company in Florida that specializes in freeze-drying housepets when they die. The company is now getting requests from people who want to be "freeze-dried" when they die. A spokesman said that he expects this to happen in a two to three year period. He envisions...the day of the glass-topped coffin and perpetual viewing chapels...so that the family can visit whenever they want. They claim that a freeze-dried body will last virtually forever.

No, we don't deal well with the fact of death and neither did those early disciples. They were a disappointed, discouraged and defeated lot on that first Easter morning. It would be difficult...virtually impossible...to imagine them mounting any kind of a crusade at this point in their lives - much less, turning the world upside down. Their grief was genuine, almost debilitating.

THEIR SURPRISE AT THE STRANGE TALE THE WOMEN TOLD

just as genuine to me was their surprise at the strange tale the women told them. Chances are you know the story by heart.

Moving on to a second thought to consider,

Some of the women had gone to the tomb to prepare the body with spices and ointments. Reaching the tomb, however, they found the stone rolled away. While they were trying to sift this through their minds, two men dressed in

dazzling apparel appeared to them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. The men asked them one of the most startling questions in all of human history,

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise."

The women remembered that Christ had spoken those exact words and they rushed to where the men were in hiding and broke to them the most wonderful headline of all times, "He is risen!"

And how did the Disciples react? Luke tells us in these troublesome words, "But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them!"

Now...how's that for a conspiracy? Perhaps Lee Harvey Oswald was part of a conspiracy when he assassinated President Kennedy. And perhaps there are some suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of Marilyn Monroe. But it is ludicrous to conjecture as some have done that the disciples made up the story of the resurrection. As a man remarked gazing into the carved deeps of the Grand Canyon, "something happened here!" And it did. He is alive!

Dr. Oswald Hoffman widely listened to voice of the Lutheran Hour was once asked, "What is the difference between Christianity and all the other religions of the world". Dr. Hoffman replied, "Jesus lives!" That is the Good News. Jesus lives.

There's a story about a devout old fisherman who, when he was physically able, walked 14 miles to Church on Sunday. One Sunday there was a terrible storm and the old man arrived at the Church very late. In fact, he was so late that all he heard was the final phase of the pastor's Benediction. "Now and forevermore" were the words he heard. His friends gathered around him at the coffee hour to say how sorry they were that he had been disappointed after his difficult 14 mile walk. And he replied, "Disappointed? Never!" he said.

"It's worth walking 28 miles every Sunday to just hear those three words, 'Now and Forevermore!'"

Now, I know why some of you come in just at the last minute. But praise the Lord for that! Yes, "Now and forevermore!"

THE CHANGE THAT CHRIST'S RESURRECTION MADE IN THEIR LIVES

We are confronted, first, with the

genuineness of the grief of the disciples, and second, with the genuineness of their surprise at the "idle tale" of the women. Finally, an even more impressive, however, was the genuineness of the change that Christ's resurrection made in their lives.

From defeated to dynamic. From heartsick to heroic. From doubting to death-defying. The radical change that took place in the lives of those who followed Jesus is not the kind of change one will find among persons who are perpetuating a fraud. One does not die defending a wild fairy tale. The disciples were witness to an event that divides all of human history into before and after. Christ had risen from the dead!

There's been much interest of late in the subject of life after death. Researchers have found that persons who have been revived following near-death experiences tell amazingly similar tales - about bright lights and about such things as "out of body" episodes. Are we to believe their reports?

J. B. Phillips is universally esteemed for his translation of The New Testament in Modern English and for his books such as Your God Is Too Small. Phillips vows and declares that a few days after the death of writer C. S. Lewis a few years back, that Lewis appeared to Phillips sitting in a chair only a few feet away. He testified that Lewis spoke a few words of particular relevance to a difficult situation through which Phillips was passing. How does one handle this? What does one make of such an experience? Either Phillips is a liar - and practically no one will accept that. Or he was hallucinating. Or Lewis was alive after his death. Those are the only three possibilities as I see them. I guess you may take your pick.

But I find it difficult to believe that Phillips, however, would have been willing to have been thrown into the gladiator's ring to support his contention that he had really seen Lewis.

The disciples, however, were willing to give up everything they had including their very lives in defense of their contention that Christ was alive. Why? Because they now knew without a doubt that death no longer had dominion over them. Christ was alive and they offered up the rest of their lives spreading the Good News. And, dear friends, is not that our task, too.

In his book, The Christian Way, Maxie Dunnam tells an interesting story about the great Canadian photographer, Yousaf Karsh. According to Maxie Dunnam, Yousaf Karsh took only one portrait of a person's back - that of Pablo Casals in a small French abbey in 1954. Karsh writes that as he was setting up his equipment, Casals began playing Bach on his cello. Karsh was so enthralled by the music that he almost forgot why he was there. He took his portrait of Casals with the little bald-headed man bent over his cello, frozen in time against the plain stone wall of that chapel. Karsh said that he took it that way to capture the loneliness of the truly great artists and the loneliness of exile.

Years later, when the portrait was on exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, another old, bald-headed man came day after day and stood for long moments at a time in front of the portrait. The curator of the museum noticed him and when his curiosity got the better of him, he went over and tapped the man on the shoulder and asked him why he stood so long before the picture. The old man, with obvious irritation, turned on the curator and said, "Hush, young man....can't you see I'm listening to the music!"

Somehow in our witness to the world in which and I live we need to present such a picture of Christ - His life, His death, His resurrection, His music...if you will...His continuing presence with us. We need to present a picture that has authenticity, that is real and vibrant.

CLOSING

In one of his writings, the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel made this important observation,

"There are no proofs for the existence of God;
there are only witnesses."

He is right. I cannot open a text and prove to you scientifically that God exists. I can only testify to my own experience and the experience of others. My own experience is that Christ is alive because I have felt His spirit at work in my own life. That was the testimony of the early Church but they were more credible and more dramatic. Why? Because their experience of Him was more dramatic. They had known Him before His crucifixion and they had encountered Him after His resurrection. No wonder they turned the world upside down. People who heard their testimony were convinced that they were telling the truth. Their words rang with authenticity.

Yes, something had happened - deeply mysterious - not only to Christ, but to them. Their Lord who was dead was now alive. The testimony of the women had not been an idle tale but had the ring of Eternal truth, and the best evidence of that truth was the changed lives that occurred in those who knew Him then and those who know Him and follow Him even now.

Do you know Him? Is the Good News of Easter still an idle tale to you? Or are you among those who have encountered Him in their own lives and who this day proclaim, "Yes. Yes...He is alive. I have felt His spirit. He is alive. Now and forevermore. Amen"

PRAYER O God, we thank You for the life, the love, the death and the risen Jesus...opening as it does to us the larger areas of life. Help us to make the most of them....not to be satisfied with the shallows of cynical and doubting and skeptical minds. Take our natural impulses, O God, and stretch them.

Confirm them and reassure them on this day of Resurrection, And give us the new life that is "in Christ" and help us to give it to other people who are waiting to be raised from the dead. In the spirit of the Risen Christ, we pray. Amen

"IDLE TALE OR ETERNAL TRUTH?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 26, 1989

"IDLE TALE OR ETERNAL TRUTH?"

TEXT: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them".

(Luke 24: 11)

INTRODUCTION

Over a thousand years ago, a Spanish kingdom was under attack by foreign invaders. For many years, one small fort withstood all assaults, thanks to a remarkable leader called El Cid. When El Cid died, his followers came up with an idea. They dressed up his body in all of its armor, tied a sword in his hand, and placed him on his horse. And with El Cid's body in the lead, the Spanish forces charged. But they were quickly defeated, for this act fooled no one. Their desperate trick collapsed. El Cid's followers quickly surrendered to despair when their plan failed.

I suppose there will always be those who insist that this was the strategy of the early Church - a dead leader, dressed in armor, propped up on a horse with a sword in hand. It reminds one of what the Chief Priests said to the soldiers following the resurrection of Christ:

"Tell people that His disciples came while you were asleep and stole His body. That way if the story of His disappearance reaches the governor's ears, you won't get into trouble".
(Matthew 28: 14)

Thus from the very beginning, the explanation was advanced that the disciples had stolen the body of Christ in order to invent the story of His resurrection. A dead body dressed in armor, sword in hand, and mounted on a horse.

And never has a less satisfactory solution been proposed to a difficult mystery. The reason this explanation was not persuasive then is the same reason it is not persuasive now. It simply does not fit the facts. Let's review some of those facts this morning concerning the resurrection of Christ.

THE GENUINENESS OF HIS FRIENDS' GRIEF

To begin with, let's consider the genuineness of His friends' grief.

Never has there been a more demoralized group of believers than that tiny band of followers after the events of Good Friday. Only the women were brave enough to mourn Him in public. The men were all in hiding...fearful that the Roman soldiers would next come for them. They were obviously stunned by the sudden turn of events. In one week's time they had seen their leader go from being cheered on His entrance into Jerusalem to being crucified between two thieves. "We hoped that He was the One to redeem Israel..." they had said to a stranger on the Emmaus Road. But now He was dead and so were their dreams.

We can understand that. We, too, have difficulty accepting our own mortality or the death of a loved one. We can appreciate the feelings of a little girl who wrote a letter to God that went something like this,

"Dear God,

Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you've got now?"

We wish That God work like that, but He doesn't. The undertakers of this world all sign their letters, "Eventually Yours". We don't deal with that fact very well, do we? As Woody Allen once said,

"It is impossible to experience one's own death objectively and still whittle a happy tune...."

Which reminds me that someone posted an article on an obstetrical floor in a nearby hospital which said,

"Recent research shows that the first five minutes of life are very risky." And someone scribbled underneath it, "And yes, the last five minutes aren't so hot either".

In the Broadway play, The Best Man, the plot centers around the struggle for the Presidency. An aging, ex-President asks one of the candidates, "Bill, do you believe in God?" Bill stiffly replies, "I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church". "That's not what I asked" says the former Chief Executive. "I'm a Methodist and I'm still asking you if you believe in God and a day of judgement and a hereafter?"

The ex-President goes on to confess he is dying of cancer,

"I tell you, son" he says, "I'm scared to death...I don't fancy being just a pinch of dust." The young candidate tries to console him by reminding him that the good he has done will live on...to which the older man replies, "I suggest you tell yourself that when you finally have to face a whole pile of nothin' up ahead."

We don't deal very well with the idea of death, do we? I read recently about a company in Florida that specializes in freeze-drying housepets when they die. The company is now getting requests from people who want to be "freeze-dried" when they die. A spokesman said that he expects this to happen in a two to three year period. He envisions...the day of the glass-topped coffin and perpetual viewing chapels...so that the family can visit whenever they want. The claim that a "freeze-dried body will last virtually forever."

No, we don't deal well with the fact of death and neither did those early disciples. They were a disappointed, discouraged and defeated lot on that first Easter morning. It would be difficult...virtually impossible...to imagine them mounting any kind of a crusade at this point in their lives - much less, turning the world upside down. Their grief was genuine, almost debilitating.

THEIR SURPRISE AT THE STRANGE TALE THE WOMEN TOLD

Moving on to a second thought to consider,

just as genuine to me was their surprise at the strange tale the women told them. Chances are you know the story by heart.

Some of the women had gone to the tomb to prepare the body with spices and ointments. Reaching the tomb, however, they found the stone rolled away. While they were trying to sift this through their minds, two men dressed in

dazzling apparel appeared to them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. The men asked them one of the most startling questions in all of human history,

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise."

The women remembered that Christ had spoken those exact words and they rushed to where the men were in hiding and broke to them the most wonderful headline of all times, "He is risen!"

And how did the Disciples react? Luke tells us in these troublesome words, "But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them!"

Now...how's that for a conspiracy? Perhaps Lee Harvey Oswald was part of a conspiracy when he assassinated President Kennedy. And perhaps there are some suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of Marilyn Monroe. But it is ludicrous to conjecture as some have done that the disciples made up the story of the resurrection. As a man remarked gazing into the carved deeps of the Grand Canyon, "something happened here!" And it did. He is alive!

Dr. Oswald Hoffman widely listened to voice of the Lutheran Hour was once asked, "What is the difference between Christianity and all the other religions of the world". Dr. Hoffman replied, "Jesus lives!" That is the Good News. Jesus lives.

There's a story about a devout old fisherman who, when he was physically able, walked 14 miles to Church on Sunday. One Sunday there was a terrible storm and the old man arrived at the Church very late. In fact, he was so late that all he heard was the final phase of the pastor's Benediction. "Now and forevermore" were the words he heard. His friends gathered around him at the coffee hour to say how sorry they were that he had been disappointed after his difficult 14 mile walk. And he replied, "Disappointed? Never!" he said.

"It's worth walking 28 miles every Sunday to just hear those three words, 'Now and Forevermore'"

Now, I know why some of you come in just at the last minute. But praise the Lord for that! Yes, "Now and forevermore!"

THE CHANGE THAT CHRIST'S RESURRECTION MADE IN THEIR LIVES

We are confronted, first, with the genuineness of the grief of the disciples, and second, with the genuineness of their surprise at the "idle tale" of the women. Finally, an even more impressive, however, was the genuineness of the change that Christ's resurrection made in their lives.

From defeated to dynamic. From heartsick to heroic. From doubting to death-defying. The radical change that took place in the lives of those who followed Jesus is not the kind of change one will find among persons who are perpetuating a fraud. One does not die defending a wild fairy tale. The disciples were witness to an event that divides all of human history into before and after. Christ had risen from the dead!

There's been much interest of late in the subject of life after death. Researchers have found that persons who have been revived following near-death experiences tell amazingly similar tales - about bright lights and about such things as "out of body" episodes. Are we to believe their reports?

J. B. Phillips is universally esteemed for his translation of The New Testament in Modern English and for his books such as Your God Is Too Small. Phillips vows and declares that a few days after the death of writer C. S. Lewis a few years back, that Lewis appeared to Phillips sitting in a chair only a few feet away. He testified that Lewis spoke a few words of particular relevance to a difficult situation through which Phillips was passing. How does one handle this? What does one make of such an experience? Either Phillips is a liar - and practically no one will accept that. Or he was hallucinating. Or Lewis was alive after his death. Those are the only three possibilities as I see them. I guess you may take your pick.

But I find it difficult to believe that Phillips, however, would have been willing to have been thrown into the gladiator's ring to support his contention that he had really seen Lewis.

The disciples, however, were willing to give up everything they had including their very lives in defense of their contention that Christ was alive. Why? Because they now knew without a doubt that death no longer had dominion over them. Christ was alive and they offered up the rest of their lives spreading the Good News. And, dear friends, is not that our task, too.

In his book, The Christian Way, Maxie Dunnam tells an interesting story about the great Canadian photographer, Yousaf Karsh. According to Maxie Dunnam, Yousaf Karsh took only one portrait of a person's back - that of Pablo Casals in a small French abbey in 1954. Karsh writes that as he was setting up his equipment, Casals began playing Bach on his cello. Karsh was so enthralled by the music that he almost forgot why he was there. He took his portrait of Casals with the little bald-headed man bent over his cello, frozen in time against the plain stone wall of that chapel. Karsh said that he took it that way to capture the loneliness of the truly great artists and the loneliness of exile.

Years later, when the portrait was on exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, another old, bald-headed man came day after day and stood for long moments at a time in front of the portrait. The curator of the museum noticed him and when his curiosity got the better of him, he went over and tapped the man on the shoulder and asked him why he stood so long before the picture. The old man, with obvious irritation, turned on the curator and said, "Hush, young man....can't you see I'm listening to the music!"

Somehow in our witness to the world in which and I live we need to present such a picture of Christ - His life, His death, His resurrection, His music...if you will...His continuing presence with us. We need to present a picture that has authenticity, that is real and vibrant.

CLOSING

In one of his writings, the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel made this important observation,

"There are no proofs for the existence of God;
there are only witnesses."

He is right. I cannot open a text and prove to you scientifically that God exists. I can only testify to my own experience and the experience of others. My own experience is that Christ is alive because I have felt His spirit at work in my own life. That was the testimony of the early Church but they were more credible and more dramatic. Why? Because their experience of Him was more dramatic. They had known Him before His crucifixion and they had encountered Him after His resurrection. No wonder they turned the world upside down. People who heard their testimony were convinced that they were telling the truth. Their words rang with authenticity.

Yes, something had happened - deeply mysterious - not only to Christ, but to them. Their Lord who was dead was now alive. The testimony of the women had not been an idle tale but had the ring of Eternal truth, and the best evidence of that truth was the changed lives that occurred in those who knew Him then and those who know Him and follow Him even now.

Do you know Him? Is the Good News of Easter still an idle tale to you? Or are you among those who have encountered Him in their own lives and who this day proclaim, "Yes. Yes...He is alive. I have felt His spirit. He is alive. Now and forevermore. Amen"

PRAYER

O God, we thank You for the life, the love, the death and the risen Jesus...opening as it does to us the larger areas of life. Help us to make the most of them....not to be satisfied with the shallows of cynical and doubting and skeptical minds. Take our natural impulses, O God, and stretch them.

Confirm them and reassure them on this day of Resurrection, And give us the new life that is "in Christ" and help us to give it to other people who are waiting to be raised from the dead. In the spirit of the Risen Christ, we pray. Amen

PRAYER O Risen Lord of all life, we pause here at the end of our Easter service...in moments of prayer and wonder. The Good News once again overwhelms us. Christ is risen - risen indeed! And we ask that somehow we might comprehend more of the great mystery of this day as we stand before You cradling our newborn hopes.

Come close to each of us and touch what is dead within us and bring us into newness of life. Transform our timid caution into joyful confidence and strong assurance. Strengthen us to believe that "in Christ" shall all be made alive...that someday God will wipe away every tear, that someday death shall be no more, and neither shall there be mourning or crying.

Let Thy word of hope and resurrection bid once again for the hearts of all people everywhere until in the light that streams from Joseph's Garden, we see our world, our neighbor, and ourselves....only through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Mrs. Charles E. Stagemyer, in memory of
Charles E. Stagemyer
Daphne Thompson
Marianna Thompson, in memory of
Frank N. Thompson
Ned Vail, in memory of
Gladys Dunsworth
Mrs. Edrena M. Washington, in memory
of loved ones
Len and Bert Williams, in memory of
Mrs. Annie Williams, Mr. Arthur
Williams and Mr. Elmore Banton
Alexandra and Philip Yu, in memory of
the Yu Family and the Searing
Family
A friend, in memory of Dennis Dribble
Their Loving Family, in memory of
Mrs. Catherine Hummel and Mrs.
Mildred Hummel
Dorinoa A. Rulle
Anonymous

EASTER LILIES

The Easter lilies have been given by the
following members and friends of the parish:

Michele Barton, in memory of
Ophelia and Wilmertha Barton
Carolyn Broones, in memory of
Dr. Otto Broones
Ann and Gordon Bryant, in memory of
loved ones
Jane Chaney, in memory of
Mildred and Emmett Chaney
Robin Chauncey, in memory of
my grandmother, Eliza Wise
George Crawford, in memory of
my mother
Toily and Eric de Freitas, in memory
of Susie McIntosh, Percy de Frietas
Anna Delson, in memory of
loved ones

Fran Ellison, in memory of
Rev. C.H. Ellison and Mrs.
Sarah Ellison Pritchard
Joyce and Lee Gartrell, in memory
of their parents, Mildred and
Irving Gartrell and Myrtle and
Herbert Dusendorf
Otis Hairston, in memory of
loved ones
Carol Hawkins, in memory of
loved ones
Frank High, in memory of
Arthur and Elizabeth High
Peter and Janet Jacobson, in memory
of Westin Jacobson
Charlotte Juchter, in memory of
my dear beloved mother, friend.
Always in my heart

Sandra Jung, in memory of
Kyung Jin Jung
Dr. and Mrs. John Lombardo and Marisa,
in memory of loved ones
Lynn Fry MacShane, in memory of my
parents, Virginia and Arthur Fry
Jeanne Ewing Martini, in memory of
John Martini
Vera Minott, in memory of
loved ones
Ann and Charles C. Neal, in memory of
Mary Jo Lomonaco
Olivia and Agnes Olsson, in memory of
loved ones
Amy and Robert Ruttenberg, in memory
of Mr. and Mrs. Morry Ruttenberg
Dee and Michael Schafffield, in memory
of Edna and Edward Schafffield