

Delirious Lunatics
Luke 24:1-12
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I hope you were able to see that beautiful full moon of the last few evenings. Traditionally, the March full moon is known as “Worm Moon” in northern countries, supposedly because when the ground softens, the earthworm casts reappear, inviting the return of the robins. But it’s also called the Paschal Moon because its appearance signals the soon-to-arrive day of Easter, since the date of Easter is calculated based on the appearance of the first full moon following the vernal equinox, which is March 21. Since the moon came full on March 27 of this year, and since March 27 is after March 21, we celebrate Easter this year on March 31, the first Sunday that follows. Yes, it seems a bit complicated, but there you have it. The earliest day we could possibly have Easter is therefore March 22, and the latest is April 25, and incidentally, only three times in the last 150 years has Easter fallen on even its second earliest possible date of March 23, the most recent coming just a few years ago. But in case you were wondering about Easter falling on its earliest day, the last time was the year 1818, and the next time will be in the year 2285. And in fact, the date on which Easter is most likely to fall is today, March 31. But all that is an idle tale.

Some historians suggest that the reason this method of calculating the date of Easter was set had to do with the pilgrimages that people would take to the Holy

Land near the time of both the Passover but also that vernal equinox, one of the days of the year when the amount of daytime and nighttime was equal. A long journey through a hot desert would be made easier by traveling at night, but that was difficult without our modern convenience of electricity, and so the next best alternative was sought, and that was the light of the moon. And so to accommodate the arrival of pilgrims, Easter was set as a moveable feast when the moon could offer its light, but also so that the pilgrims could take advantage of some of the cooler hours of the growing daylight. But that too is an idle tale.

The burning of Judas is an Easter-time ritual in many Orthodox and Catholic Christian communities, where an effigy of Judas Iscariot is burned. Though not an official part of the Easter liturgical cycle, the custom is typically a part of the reenactment of the story of the Passion that is practiced by the faithful during Easter. Customs vary, but the effigy of Judas is typically hanged (reenacting Matthew 27:5) on Good Friday, then burned on the night of Easter Sunday. And then there's the Easter Bunny, and the decorated eggs, and the plastic grass, and the new clothes for Easter, and lilies, and all the rest. But all those are idle tales.

Maybe by now you get where I am going. What do all of these idle tales have to do with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead? With the empty tomb? With two men in dazzling clothes asking "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." With remembering how Jesus had told them exactly what would happen? Well, from even that first day, the

story of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and the empty tomb, the angels, and all the rest, have been considered "an idle tale." Mary and the other women return from discovering the great news of the empty tomb, and all that the rest of the disciples can do is think they were off their rockers. "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." To call it simply an idle tale was "actually a fairly generous translation of the Greek work *leros*. That word, you see, is the root of our word 'delirious.' So in short, they thought what the women said was crazy, nuts, utter nonsense." Perhaps it is telling that after Peter decided to see for himself the so-called empty tomb, and discovered that it was in fact as the women had said, that he went straight home, "amazed at what had happened," but apparently not willing to open himself up to the same charge of delirium by bringing the same news as the women. Can you just imagine how those poor women felt, they who were the first bringers of the world's greatest news, only to be told they were out of their minds?

The world is full of idle tales of two sorts. The first kind of tales are idle in the same sense as our story tonight, because they are considered "unbelievable," or too hard to believe. They are not taken seriously because we think they are fashioned by seemingly fanatical and delirious people. UFOs, Bigfoot, La Chupacabra, the Loch Ness Monster, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These stories are so far out, or far enough out that they are easily dismissed, even if they for a time capture the popular imagination. We don't have a problem with idle tales

presented as merely idle tales. Hollywood would cease to exist if we did. It is when we try to pass off as truth what seems too difficult to be true that charges of delirious are pressed.

The second kind of idle tale is the one that is idle because it seems superfluous, not necessary to live the kind of life to which one aspires. It can be easily dismissed so as to get on with the weightier matters of the day, or easily embraced to avoid the weightier matters of the day. The Kardashians come to mind. The Internet is full of such delirium and foolishness. At best, this second kind is a benign distraction, a little light entertainment to take the edge off a hard day. At worst it is an addiction, a means of checking out completely and submerging ourselves in a fantasy world in which we think we can avoid pain and heartache. But the tales are idle no matter which way we take them.

I think the resurrection is, today, an idle tale of both types. On the one hand, perhaps even more so than on that first Easter morning, we are disinclined to believe something so supranatural could have happened. We have two thousand years more knowledge of the way the world works, of the laws of nature, and the ways of science, how incredibly difficult is even the resuscitation of a dead body, much less a resurrection. In that same period, we have dissected and demythologized the Biblical texts, and found enough parallels to the story of Christ in other religions and myths to make some of us willing to believe that what we used to call miraculous is just borrowing from other competing motifs, or trying to

one-up other worldviews. If the story of the empty tomb seemed fanciful to the ears of those who lived two thousand years ago, who, some would say, were far more inclined to believe in that kind of divine intervention, how much more ridiculous must it sound today?

And on the other hand we must ask how much more superfluous could the idea of resurrection be today, especially among those who have no idea what it is like to suffer as the peasants disciples and followers of Jesus did? There seems to me to be more than a casual correlation between the depths of one's suffering and the fervor of one's faith. It is something like the old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes. And so, from the western contexts from which most of us come, what need do we have for a God when, for the most part, we control our own destinies? Who cares about God's power when we have wealth and weapons? We don't need anyone to save us, from either sin or suffering. The answer to any question we might have can be found on Wikipedia. If we don't like the answer we receive there, we can find another with the help of Google. And if that fails, there is no end of telemarketers or pharmaceutical companies who can sell us something to ease our anxiety about not having all the answers.

And it is not just skeptics and atheists who question or dismiss the risen Christ as an idle tale. Faithful people too wrestle with the challenges of believing a miracle that seems a little hard to believe, and of believing it when there seems little benefit to believe it. Or at least those faithful people wrestle with living as

though it is more than an idle tale of either sort. They accept the resurrection because they are supposed to accept it, because they honor the creeds in which it is included, because they had to say they believed it to make it out of Confirmation Class. But either some element of doubt, or the lack of a whole hearted embrace of the resurrection of Jesus Christ linger in churches of every sort, even ours to be sure, and leave the story to be greeted anew as an idle tale by the next generation.

I began by describing some idle tales that fall into that second, superfluous category, tales about how and why the date of Easter is calculated, and about customs attached to this day we call Easter. We could just as easily celebrate Easter on every second Sunday in April, if it suited us, rather than on the first Sunday following the first full moon following the vernal equinox. We could dismiss pilgrimages as irrelevant since we know God does not reside in a specific place, but everywhere and in our hearts. We could leave behind all our rituals and customs of the season and focus more exclusively on this unbelievable resurrection. And we can do that, and probably should, because all of them are idle tales that distract us from what is really important: an encounter with the risen Christ who changes the rules of the game, who lives and reigns at the right hand of God the Father, who transforms our lives if we will but let him. The resurrection cannot be an idle tale in our hearts. It cannot be an idle tale in our lives. It cannot be an idle tale in our world. We must put anything that leads us to dismiss the empty tomb as an idle tale behind us in the same way that Jesus said to Peter, “Get

behind me Satan!” when that disciple denied that this resurrection would happen.

Put those Easter bunnies back in the closet!

But. But. Perhaps there is good reason that Easter is associated with the full moon after all. Perhaps it’s so that we might catch a little lunacy, act a little abnormally, behave like the resurrection really matters while the rest of the world denies it. The word “lunatic” is usually used to refer to people who are considered mentally ill, dangerous, foolish or unpredictable, people whose lives themselves are an idle tale. The word derives, of course, from *lunaticus* meaning “of the moon” or “moonstruck,” because it was thought that the full moon made people act in strange ways because it disrupted normal sleep patterns. Philosophers such as Aristotle and Pliny the Elder argued that the full moon caused a partial sleep deprivation that was sufficient to induce mania in susceptible bipolar patients, and seizures in patients with seizure disorders. Now, *that’s* an idle tale, but wouldn’t it be something if we who proclaim the resurrection were as struck by it as those who were once called lunatics were supposedly moonstruck. What might the world look like if we were delirious lunatics for Jesus, believing, and acting out our belief, that God changed the world once and for all, defeating death when our Lord was raised?

And what might our world look like if we were deliriously lunatic enough to put our faith into action like a pilgrimage for which we needed God’s guiding light? To make a commitment and honor it in front of all the people we pass by

along the way, no matter whether it be labeled an idle tale? What if we lived our lives as a pilgrimage toward God's vision for the world, letting nothing stand in our way of that goal, even if caring for the castoffs of society, or the air we breathe is considered superfluous? What if the resurrection was more a lifestyle than a doctrine? How delirious would you be willing to look? How many times have you heard the Easter Sunday story? And when's the last time it made a difference in your life? Will we be like the women who went and eagerly told the disciples? Or like Peter, who went straight home and kept the good news to himself?

The good news of the Gospel is that God doesn't call us to be delirious lunatics without having been one first. You see, God is the one who is delirious. God is the great lunatic. God is the one who did in Jesus Christ the unbelievable for the very people who thought it superfluous. God's power isn't limited by how unbelievable we may find it. God's grace isn't limited by how superfluous we may think it is. And God's love isn't limited by how idle a tale it may seem to us in our doubting moments, or the world in all its skepticism. God raised Jesus from the grave and made death the idle tale, once and for all. Alleluia, Alleluia. Amen.