

“The Mutterings of the Delirious?”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Texts: Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24 and Luke 24: 1-12

Happy Easter! You look so nice! You look so happy! It's the highest attended Sunday of the year. For some of you, the kids are here. For some of you, you are only thinking about brunch or the big Easter dinner following worship. The kids are hopped up (pun intended) on candy. All seems well with the world. We think that Easter was always this way.

However, we forget that on that first Easter the women going to the tomb didn't know what we know. They were not coming in on a sugar rush or a joyful high. No, they were coming in with a heavy dose of Good Friday grief. For them, all hope had been lost. They had come to care for Jesus' body in the traditional way that one was cared for after they died. No Easter joy here. Just massive grief and mourning. I bet some of you already are going, "Oh no, he's going to talk about grief on Easter Sunday. What's wrong with this guy?" The truth is that without grief there cannot be exuberant joy. It's because of grief that the words of the women upon returning from the tomb were thought to be "an idle tale" or better said, "nonsense" or the mutterings of the delirious. When we are grieving, it's hard to hear good news. And so it was that first Easter morning.

Let's first talk about what we don't want to talk about. Let's talk about grief. We live in a society that to a large degree has no idea how to deal with grief. Grief far more often gets shoved down, covered over, and ignored until it comes out as rage, anger and

sometimes even violence. Many agree that it's our failure to grieve that in part makes us angry all the time and is a contributing factor to our violence. Even if we know this to be true, we still are experts at ignoring or shoving aside our grief, and it's not doing us any good.

We have a lot to grieve about. Some of us are grieving loss of a loved one who has passed since this time last year. Others of us are grieving the loss of relationship. Still more grieve the loss of so much in our forests given the recent ice storms – or grieving the damage our homes and cars received. Some of us are grieving a job loss, or other economic hardship, or we are grieving a change in our job culture where we feel threatened or otherwise challenged. Some of us are grieving profound change in our country and are feeling threatened by the powers-that-be. Some are grieving because Spring is taking forever to arrive, and we just want to see little flowers start to emerge and buds on the trees. But the grief the women felt on that first Easter was deep as hope itself had died with Jesus on Friday. Maybe your grief is as deep as theirs was. Maybe your grief feels like “a heavy weight tugging at your heart.” Here you are on Easter Sunday in church and much of your inner self wants to sit here and sob. This may mean you feel some guilt and shame because you're having a tough time finding your way to joy.

I truly am sorry if you are hurting in that way, but if this is true, then you understand better than anyone the mood and spirit of the women on the way to the tomb that first Easter.

The women had been with Jesus for the long haul. “They had absorbed his teachings and witnessed his healings—and they’ve watched his tortuous death, remaining at a safe distance until they could follow him to his tomb (Sanctified Art, *Everything [in] Between Sermon Planning Guide*).” Now that he has died, they do what their faith teaches them to do: they prepare the spices and oil. These were used to anoint the body. With the spices and oil in hand they go to the tomb steeped in grief. It doesn’t get any better when they arrive. At the tomb, their grief is then followed by fear. The tomb is open. The body is gone. What has happened?

Then two men appear. Put yourself in the place of the women. How are you feeling right now? Let’s just say that depends (pun intended, think about it!). Full of grief, fearful of what has happened. These two people kind of appear with bright clothing on. Terrified?

Then the men say the most amazing things. They ask why you are looking for the living among the dead. They remind you of what he told you while he was alive. The Bible records that the women seemed to immediately believe what they have been told. I wonder if it was that quick. When you are full of grief, fear, and utter terror, how well do you hear good news? How well do you recall promises made? How much would you believe that Jesus had indeed raised from the dead? How many of you struggle right now with the idea that Jesus is among us and that God is at work in this world? How many of us right now feel like all is lost and nothing can pull the shroud away and lead us to hope? How many of us are like the disciples when they first heard the news?

Oh yes, the disciples. Remember those guys? The ones who either betrayed Jesus or deserted him? The ones who were now hiding? Talk about grief, sorrow, fear, terror, and a host of other dreadful things. The disciples were an emotional mess. Amid their grieving and fear, the women come back with this tale of Jesus having risen from the dead. Is it any wonder that the men thought the women's words were at least an idle tale? Some have said a better interpretation is that the disciples feared the women were delirious. Grief can cloud our judgment. "It can lead us to resist the truth or cause us not to trust people (Sanctified Art, p34)." Has your grief or fear ever kept you from trusting the words of others? Has it ever led you to distrust everything you hear, especially if it's good? Maybe your grief leads you to deeper trust, but for me, I could imagine I'd be much more like the disciples than the women.

Peter, however, goes to check it out. He runs to the tomb. What if it's true? Did he run with light feet of joy and hope, or did he run with purpose to see if the women had truly gone mad? I don't know, but he runs to the tomb, looks in, and, as Luke tells it, "He left wondering what had happened." Then he simply went home. Maybe that is what we'll do today, too. We'll hear the good news, listen to the beautiful music, and simply go home. We showed ourselves. We looked. We saw. Yup, Jesus is not in the tomb. Now we go home wondering what happened. Was Peter's grief and doubt so deep he couldn't believe it, or did he just not know what to do with the good news? I don't know, but I do know that it takes a lot to believe something good. Often, it doesn't take much at all to believe in something bad. No wonder so many people believe everything bad they hear without any evidence.

Regardless of Peter's response, what is ours? Are the women delirious? Is the church naïve to keep celebrating this day? Are things so dead that they cannot be resurrected? Has our hope been dashed against a stone, buried and is it left to not see another day? Does all the sad news of the world--the deep grief we feel--get in the way of believing that Jesus truly rose from the dead?

Rev. Jeff Chu, in his commentary on this passage tells us that grief is liminal, not terminal. Liminal is defined as "occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold." Another definition is, "relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process." Chu asks us, "What makes an ember of hope flare up into a reviving fire?" He tells us that sometimes it takes memory. In the case of the women, they remembered Jesus' words. It also took outside help in the form of the angels. It was not instantaneous. And yet, they remembered. Memory can be a powerful way to work through our grief and lead us to hope.

He also says sometimes it's testimony. The women's story gave Peter just enough hope to get up, run to the tomb, and seek more for himself. Sometimes we need the words of others to revive our hope. Testimony of good things, hopeful things, wonderful things. Reviving hope is one of many reasons we need community. The church is here today to give testimony to what the women said so long ago. Jesus rose!

However, Rev. Chu reminds us that sometimes neither memory nor testimony will feel sufficient. The cold cloak of grief may still be too thick, as it was for Jesus' other friends. "To them, the women's story was..."and idle tale" ...[or] better yet "nonsense" or the mutterings of the delirious." He goes on to say, "the other apostles' incredulity feels so

relatable to me, especially in the context of our contemporary lives. In a world beset by so much sorrow, so much suffering, and so much heartbreak, a glimmer of good news can have such a tough time breaking my gloom. A glimpse of beauty, a flash of loveliness can feel like foolishness amidst so much bad news.” We might even feel guilty if we feel hope, or joy, or ... We might feel foolish to believe in any good news right now.

“That isn’t to say, of course, that it’s wrong to sit with grief,” Chu tells us. “Our grief deserves our attention because mourning is a bittersweet memento of love. We need not rank our griefs either. Even when it comes to the pettiest, tiniest things, we need to grieve so that we can make room for the better.”

He ends with, “There’s the key, though: our grief cannot become our everything. With memory, testimony, and time, we can recognize that grief is liminal, not terminal. And it need not crowd out other truths: that we have loved and been loved. That we are not alone. That there is still hope in the land of the living.” In other words, while it may seem the women’s tale was some form of delirium, perhaps if we deal with our own grief, we may be able to make room for the good news: Jesus is risen. And with him we rise. Death does not have the final word. And most of all, God has not left us abandoned to our grief and the sorrows of the world.

Happy Easter! Christ is Risen! Amen.