

Nonsense and Idle Tales  
Luke 24:1-12, Acts 10:34-43

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Or is he? According to the gospel reading, the disciples were in an upper room following Christ's crucifixion. They were saddened by his death and afraid that they, too, would be arrested and crucified like their master. When suddenly, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and several other women burst into the room, telling a strange tale. According to the women, they had visited Jesus' grave and found it empty. But more than this, they had been met by two men in dazzling clothes, angels they supposed, who said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." (Lk. 24:5-7) "He is risen!" they told the apostles. "But these words seemed to them an idle tale (or nonsense as other translations have it), and they did not believe them." (Lk. 24:11)

The resurrection seemed like nonsense or an idle tale to those who first heard of it. And who's to blame them? After all, people just don't rise from the dead. As you probably know, we have a cemetery and columbarium on the other side of College Creek. And every year we bury or inurn about 150 people there. I've buried more than a few of them myself. And guess what. None have risen from the dead – not a one! And I can tell by your expression that you're not surprised by that – not at all.

In fact, if I told you that the man I buried last week was seen walking about just yesterday then you'd probably question my sanity. And with good reason. Dead is dead! And the dead don't rise! Dead men stay down. And that would have been true of Jesus had he been nothing but a man. But we believe Jesus was more than a man. He was God incarnate – fully God and fully man. Like a man, he tasted death. As our God, he rose again. It's a bodacious belief! So bodacious, in fact, that many don't believe it at all. They treat it as nonsense or idle tale and try to argue it away.

Some say Jesus didn't live at all. They deny his very existence. For them, the whole story is nonsense and an idle tale. He never lived, they argue, so any talk of resurrection is nothing but a waste of time. But the evidence for his existence is so great that very few take this tack. So most unbelievers are content to argue against the reality of his resurrection because they know that if he didn't rise from the dead then he's nothing but a mere mortal, no greater than any other teacher, and he certainly isn't the Son of God and a living presence who demands our allegiance today.

Doubtless you've heard some of the arguments against the resurrection. Some say he didn't die; he simply swooned or fainted on the cross and was mistaken for dead but, revived in the tomb and his appearances were mistaken for a real resurrection. But really, are we to believe that a man who was badly beaten, then crucified, then stabbed in the side with a spear, and then sealed in a tomb guarded by soldiers, was able to roll the stone away, push his way through the guard, and convince everyone who saw him that

he was alive and well and risen from the dead? It takes more faith to believe that than it does to believe the resurrection.

Others argue that Jesus' body was stolen by the disciples who invented the story of the resurrection to keep his movement alive. But most of the disciples were persecuted, even martyred for their faith. Who would die for a lie? A man might die for a lie he believes to be true, but no one dies for a lie he knows. And besides, the very character of the disciples, as revealed throughout the New Testament, indicates that they were men of the highest moral caliber. They were not the kind of men to fabricate a falsehood. It takes more faith to believe this theory than it does to believe the resurrection.

Still others argue that the resurrection appearances of Jesus were nothing more than hallucinations induced by grief or hysteria. Well there certainly were a lot of them and they don't appear to be hallucinations. According to the New Testament, Jesus appeared numerous times in different settings. He appeared to individuals, to small groups, to large groups, to one group numbering as many as five hundred! That doesn't seem to fit the pattern of hallucinations. Again, it takes more faith to believe this theory than it does to believe in the resurrection.

There are other theories, also, and there are answers to each of them. And all of them treat the resurrection as nothing more than nonsense or an idle tale. But there is a way that believers can treat the resurrection as if it's nothing more than nonsense or an idle tale. It happens when the story of the resurrection, and the presence of the risen Savior, hits the head but not the heart and doesn't change the life at all. I know this to be true. I can speak from personal experience.

You see, I wasn't raised in a churchgoing home. My father didn't come to faith until very late in life. My mother was a Christian but she couldn't drive so we never went to church when I was young. Nevertheless, my mother tried her best to pass the faith along to me. Every Sunday she watched Reverend Rex Humbard broadcasting from the Cathedral of Tomorrow in Akron, Ohio and she watched Billy Graham whenever he was on TV and invited me to watch. As a consequence I was familiar with the story of Jesus Christ and believed it in my head.

In fact, I had a friend named Pierre who was an avowed atheist. He believed the story of Jesus was nothing more than nonsense and an idle tale. He and I often argued about the existence of God and the person of Christ – he denying, I affirming both. But if you had looked at our lives you would have seen little difference in the way we lived. We partied together, drank together, cursed together, and chased skirts together. The story of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, and the reality of his risen presence was in my head but not my heart and didn't change my life at all.

Yes, there is a way that believers can treat the resurrection as if it's nothing more than nonsense or an idle tale. It happens when the story of the resurrection, and the presence of the risen Savior, hits the head but not the heart and doesn't change the life at all. And you don't have to be profligate or decadent to treat the resurrection and the story of the risen Christ as nonsense or an idle tale.

Many a churchgoing man or woman does the same. They may be in church or chapel every Sunday confessing the Apostle's Creed and saying, "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead."

They may do all of that and yet their lives are little different from the lives of those who don't believe. Their belief has hit their head but not their heart and hasn't changed their life at all. Their belief doesn't effect how they spend their time, how they spend their money, what they watch on TV, what they view online, what they read in the papers or periodicals, how they vote, how they give, or any one of many other important aspects of their living. So the story of the resurrection and the risen Christ is for them little more than nonsense and an idle tale. I trust that you are not among them. As the author of Hebrews says in the New Testament, "Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation." (Heb. 6:9)

Yes, I hope and pray that you are not among those who treat the risen Christ and the story of his resurrection as nothing more than nonsense or an idle tale. Rather, I hope you treat the resurrection and the risen Christ as Peter did. The gospel lesson says, "These words (words about the resurrection) seemed to (the apostles) an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran! Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened." (See Lk. 24:11-12)

You see, Peter got up and ran to the empty tomb. And somewhere between the empty tomb and the upper room, he met the risen Savior! (See Lk. 24:34) And it wasn't long before he ran from the empty tomb and the upper room into the world carrying the message of resurrection and testifying to the fact that he had seen the risen Lord! In Acts chapter 10, Peter is no longer in Jerusalem. Instead, he's up in the city of Caesarea talking to a Roman soldier named Cornelius and to his entire household telling him and them about the risen Christ. He says, "We are witnesses to all the (Jesus) did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:39-43)

Yes, Peter got up and ran to the empty tomb then ran from the tomb into the world telling everyone about the risen Savior! You see the whole course of his life was shaped thereafter by the risen Christ. The resurrection was no longer nonsense; rather, it made sense of everything and the risen Lord became the driving presence behind all his living.

And the risen Christ wants to become the same for you. He wants to become the driving presence that shapes all of your living. That doesn't mean that you must do as Peter did, abandoning your vocation to become a preacher and missionary, though you should certainly follow his example in telling everyone you know about the risen Christ. No, you don't have to become a preacher or a missionary, but you do need to follow Christ in every aspect of your life.

What might that look like? Let me give you an illustration from naval history that I stumbled upon recently while reading Shelby Foote's classic narrative history of the Civil War. In that history, Foote describes another Foote, Commodore Andrew H. Foote who partnered with Ulysses S. Grant to capture Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Commodore Foote commanded a fleet of ironclads and other vessels that supported Grant in his assaults.

According to Shelby Foote, "Commodore Andrew H. Foote was a Connecticut Yankee, a small man with burning eyes, a jutting gray chin-beard, and a long, naked upper lip. A veteran who had fought the Chinese at Canton and chased slavers in the South Atlantic, he was deeply, puritanically religious, and conducted a bible school for his crew every Sunday, afloat or ashore. Twenty years before, he had had the first temperance ship in the U.S. Navy, and before the present year was out he would realize a lifelong ambition by seeing the alcohol ration abolished throughout the service. At fifty-six he had spent forty years as a career officer fighting the two things he hated most, slavery and whiskey..."<sup>1</sup>

When Grant ordered Foote to attack Fort Donelson, "Foote would have preferred to wait until he had had time to make a personal reconnaissance, but Grant's request was for an immediate attack and the commodore prepared to give it to him. He had done considerable waiting already, a whole week of it while the armorers were hammering his ironclads back into shape. All this time he had kept busy, supervising the work...Nor were spiritual matters neglected. Three days after the Henry bombardment he attended church at Cairo, where, being told that the parson was indisposed, Foote mounted to the pulpit and preached the sermon himself. 'Let not your heart be troubled,' was his text: 'ye believe in God, believe also in me.' Next day, having thus admonished and fortified his crews, he sent one ironclad up the Cumberland" to attack Fort Donelson.<sup>2</sup>

Now there was an officer who took Christ seriously. He didn't treat the story of the resurrection or the promise of the risen Christ like nonsense or an idle tale. Instead, his whole life was shaped by the resurrected Savior. Taking his cues from him, he immersed himself in the word of God, served as a lay leader providing worship for his crew, and fought for causes he believed were in keeping with Jesus' will. Some might disagree with him on the issue of temperance. All would agree with him on the issue of slavery. And everyone should agree that he sets a pretty good example for us all. This is what it means to take the story of the resurrection seriously rather than treating it like nonsense or an idle tale. It will look different for each of us because each is different but all of us must

use our time, talent, and treasure for Jesus if we truly believe his is risen from the dead and living still among us!

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Sadly, many don't believe in Jesus' resurrection. For them, the story of his resurrection is nonsense or an idle tale. (Luke 24:11) Sadder still, the resurrection is treated like nonsense and an idle tale by many who profess faith because the resurrection has not become the defining event of their life – the event that makes sense and lends purpose to all their days – and the risen Christ does not factor much into their living. But for those who truly believe, the resurrection is far from nonsense. Rather, it makes sense of everything and the risen Christ becomes the driving presence behind all they do. My friend, which is it for you? Nonsense or the greatest sense imaginable? An idle tale or the greatest story ever told? Look at how you live and you will have the answer.

And if the risen Christ really is the driving presence behind all you do, then you have a promise to look forward to. Do you remember the sermon preached by Commodore Foote? He took as his text the words of Jesus as found in Saint John's gospel. Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." (Jn. 14:1-3 KJV) That, my friend, is the promise of resurrection given by the risen Christ to all who put their trust in him! With that promise ringing in our ears, we can say to the cemetery and columbarium on the other side of College Creek: "Standby! Something miraculous is on its way. Dead isn't dead after all! Not for those who trust in Christ. Indeed, the dead in Christ shall rise again!" Happy Easter everyone! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Civil War: A Narrative, Volume 1* by Shelby Foote, p. 184. First Vintage Books Edition, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> *The Civil War: A Narrative, Volume 1* by Shelby Foote, p. 201. First Vintage Books Edition, 1986.