

# No Idle Tale

Luke 24:1-12

Farmville Baptist Church

April 17, 2022

What is an idle tale? We know what a tale is – a story, told to us in voice or in writing. Some tales are factual, some are fictional. Both can be true, in some sense, and there are ways that both fact and fiction can hide the truth, or tell something less than the full truth. There are great tales that we learn in our high school and university literature classes, and lesser tales that we read in the chapter books of our younger years. There are folk tales passed down from generation to generation, and there are fantastic tales of worlds unexplored and places only dreamt of. There are all sorts of tales.

And, among those tales, there are idle tales.

I'm a parent of two young children. I can tell you a thing or two about idle tales. Sometimes, they are meandering. Other times, they are short – even too short. Occasionally, they are interesting; more often, they can grow a bit tedious. They can even be fascinating. But the unifying element of idle tales, at least in the Tyler household, is that they do not have any real grounding in reality or impact on reality. They are stories told simply for the fun of telling stories, strengthening the imagination, and filling time.

They do not have any real purpose beyond that. They are, simply speaking, idle tales.

And for many people, the story of the resurrection of Jesus is an idle tale.

Now, we shouldn't be too surprised about that. After all, in the history of human existence, it's a pretty universal rule that death comes to us all, and that coming back from death

– true death, not simply a resuscitation – is a flight of fantasy. Medicine has come a long way, and even still, reversing the effects of death is beyond our reach. And so, as Fred Craddock reminds us, the story of Jesus’ resurrection is a “burden” on our faith.<sup>1</sup> And it isn’t just modern folks who hear the story of Jesus’ resurrection with a bit of incredulity. The disciples did, as well – and they were as close to the events of the day as anyone. As Lucy Lind Hogan puts it, “We should not be surprised when people continue in the footsteps of the disciples, receiving [the story of the resurrection of Jesus] as ‘an idle tale.’”<sup>2</sup> The report of Jesus being raised to life appeared to be, to use the actual Greek of the passage, *leyros ta reymata tauta*, or nonsense words. It

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation – Luke*, 283.

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Lind Hogan, Working Preacher commentary, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-luke-241-12-9>

seemed to the disciples – to Jesus’ friends – to be an idle tale.

But you don’t base your life on nonsense, do you?

Certainly, entire groups of people don’t base their lives on nonsense. And idle tales don’t turn out to be an enduring foundation for movements that cross oceans and continents, convincing people of every race and language and economic background and religious tradition to turn in a new direction and follow a new lord, unless those idle tales turn out to have some great truth and power to them, unless they turn out to be not so idle. Which means that, maybe, on this Easter Sunday, the 1,989<sup>th</sup> or so since that first confusing, exciting, nerve-wracking Easter, we might want to sit with this supposedly idle tale and see what it really tells us, almost 2000 years later.

The story begins in the middle – really, near the end – of the much larger story of Jesus. This peasant, the supposed son of a local carpenter, born amongst the Jewish people in 1<sup>st</sup> century Galilee, had become something of a minor religious celebrity. Certainly, his miraculous acts and gracious words were turning heads and making news. On some occasions, he could draw a crowd of thousands, though he seemed to spend most of his time with a smaller crew of a dozen close male followers and a few female disciples. The things he said were mildly threatening to the status quo, but he was an advocate of nonviolence, so he wasn't the biggest threat on Rome's plate. Even the Jewish religious leaders of his day seemed to regard him as somewhere between a nuisance and an annoyance instead of a true threat...at least until he entered Jerusalem on a donkey and started flipping tables in the Temple.

That got the establishment's attention real quick.

Threaten the economic system lining the pockets of those in power with a public demonstration designed to rile people up, and the rulers and authorities notice. Within days, they cherry-picked revolutionary quotes from his sermons, hired an inside guy to betray him, set a trap in the Garden of Gethsemane, and turned him over to the Roman governor, Pilate, on trumped-up charges of sedition. An excruciating and humiliating public execution brought a swift end to the nascent reform movement of the Galilean rabbi. As the stone of the tomb rolled into place, corrupt officials from the political and religious communities breathed a little easier. One more rabble-rouser taken care of, one more potential revolution squashed before it could really take off.

That his followers fled in fear, except for a group of women watching his burial through tear-streaked eyes, was

of no concern. This story was over, and an idle tale it turned out to be – a tale that didn't really matter at all.

Until dawn on Sunday, that is.

Early that morning, we're told, while it was still dark, some of the women who had supported Jesus and his movement went to the tomb. His band of followers might be breaking up soon – they always did when the leader was killed – but they hadn't gone home yet. And these women, like all the disciples, loved their Teacher. Jesus may have been executed like a common criminal, but he was someone meaningful to them. So they did what any Jewish person of that day would do for a loved one: they tried to tend to his body, to prepare it for burial, to observe the traditions and practices of their culture in their time of grief.

Yet, as they approached the tomb, they discovered something... unusual. The stone was rolled away. Now, that

wasn't necessarily a sign of something fantastical or magical, but it was concerning. That concern morphed into confusion and fright as they entered: there was no body there, and instead there were two men. Not just any men, either – these men were clothed in light. They filled the grim darkness of the rock-hewn tomb with blinding radiance. The women fell in fright, and perhaps in a bit of flash-blindness, before hearing these obviously-supernatural beings speak words they could barely process: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you...?”<sup>3</sup> Then, through their fear and awe, through their grief and pain, through the haze of memory, the words of Jesus came back to mind for the women. “Then they remembered his words.”<sup>4</sup> They left the tomb, empty now, and returned to their friends.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 24:5-6

<sup>4</sup> Luke 24:8

And their friends didn't believe a word of it.

Think for a moment what that moment would have been like for these brave, compassionate women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and more. They had footed the bill for much of Jesus' ministry.<sup>5</sup> They had watched Jesus' agony on the cross, watching everything that happened on that cruel Friday – the nails, the taunts, the mockery, the final, shuddering last breath.<sup>6</sup> They had been there for the burial, watching as Jesus' body was laid to rest, hearing that final *clunk* as the stone rolled into place. And they had sadly yet patiently waited through the holy sabbath until, at the first opportunity – first light on Sunday – they returned to the tomb of their beloved Teacher and Lord to anoint his body according to their customs – a body

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 8:1-3

<sup>6</sup> Luke 23:49

no longer present, a word from apparent angels that mystified their minds while sparking hope.

And their words are received as nonsense. An idle tale.

Most of the other disciples dismiss their story. Peter, at least, decides to check things for himself – though he finds nothing definitive and continues to ponder it all. But the testimony of the Scriptures, and the ramifications of all that followed, says that the women brought no idle tale that day. Their story, though unable to be verified, was true: Christ had risen. The story continued. The power of sin and death had not had the last word. And the kingdom of God Jesus had proclaimed hadn't been squashed – it was just getting started.

Eventually – and by eventually, I mean within a few hours – many of those skeptical listeners had encounters of their own with angels or with Jesus himself and came to

accept that this supposed idle tale was true. And that little band of believers – and I use that word “believer” intentionally – would continue to encounter Jesus over the next several weeks. Belief, you see, is not about what can be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. It’s not even about knowledge, or at least doesn’t end with knowledge. It’s about a choice – a choice to reject the account of the women at the tomb as nonsense words, an idle tale, or to accept it as the truth. That choice isn’t really, or ultimately, about fact. It is grounded in the event itself – do we accept the testimony of Mary Magdalene and Joanna and the rest, and eventually of Peter and James and the others – but it is more about relationship, experience. Have we experienced the Risen Lord? Have we built a relationship with God that finds him trustworthy and true? If we have, then the Resurrection of Jesus is something we find true because we believe, we trust

God and the testimony of his people and of our own experience with Jesus himself. We can't always explain it in cold, verifiable words – we can only explain it in words that may seem nonsensical, idle even, yet nevertheless convey the truth we hold most dear and that empowers us with the mission of heaven and fills us with the joy of Jesus.

It certainly filled those first followers. Their encounters with the risen Jesus, their embrace of this seemingly idle tale as somehow, incredibly, true and real, kicked off something that changed the world. Anglican scholar NT Wright suggests that the reality of this supposed idle tale explains best the rise and growing influence of the early church. He says, “In particular, it explains why the church came so very early to believe that the new age had dawned; why, in consequence, they came to believe that Jesus’ death had not been a messy accident, the end of a beautiful dream, but

rather the climactic saving act of the God of Israel, the one God of all the earth; and why, in consequence, they, to their own astonishment, arrived at the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth had done what, according to the Scriptures, only Israel's God could do.”<sup>7</sup> The resurrection was the difference between this new movement of religious faith being another ethical thread in philosophical thought and being a true world-changing undertaking. The resurrection was the difference between a slight alteration to the world as it was and a truly radical message of hope that matters both now and forever. The resurrection changed everything – because it was no idle tale.

JRR Tolkien, a teller of fantastic stories considered by some, perhaps, to be idle tales, was also a devoted Catholic Christian. He spoke of the best fantastic stories having an

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<sup>7</sup> NT Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 149.

unexpected and joyous “turn” in them, and that those turns in the story which bring joy and consolation from sorrow, a literary element he labeled eucatastrophe, point to something greater. That something greater, he said in a famous lecture, is the Gospel. He said, “in the ‘eucatastrophe’ we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater – it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* [or Gospel] in the real world.”<sup>8</sup> He expounded further:

“I would venture to say that approaching the Christian Story from this direction, it has long been my feeling (a joyous feeling) that God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels [...] and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable euctastrophe. But this story has

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<sup>8</sup> JRR Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 71.

entered History and the primary world. [...] The Birth of Jesus is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. [...] There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits.”<sup>9</sup>

This Easter, we celebrate the story that we want to be true, and that we have found to be true because we find it matches what we know about God and what we have experienced alongside Christians for the past two millennia. Strange as it may seem, the news brought by the women that early Sunday morning was no idle tale. It was, rather, the start of a new, God-breathed reality: one where evil does not have the last word and death does not win in the end, one where a different kind of world is starting to appear and

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<sup>9</sup> JRR Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 71-72

where we can live by its rules and experience its joys even now, one where wholeness can be found and peace with God and with all others can be embraced. This new reality began with the first rumbles of that tomb entrance stone, and it continues now and for eternity. That may be a bit hard for us to wrap our minds around – but it is no idle tale. It can change our lives and our world. Indeed, it already has. On this Easter Sunday, let us revel in the account of the empty tomb the women brought, for it is not nonsense. It is true, gloriously true. Alleluia!

## Questions for Further Consideration

- What do you find most powerful about the story of the resurrection?
- What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make in your life?
- How does the resurrection inspire or strengthen your faith?