

**An Idle Tale?**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – April 17, 2022**

**PLEASE READ:**  
**Acts 10:34-43**  
**Luke 24:1-12**

C.S. Lewis tells the story of when he was a tutor at Magdalen College, Oxford. He was having lunch with two of his pupils. Lewis casually referred to philosophy as a *subject*, to which one of his students replied passionately. "It wasn't a *subject* to Plato," he said, "it was a *way*." We could say the same about Easter. It's not just a *holiday*, Easter is a *way of life*!

During the past 40 days of Lent we have been reflecting on this way of Jesus. And truth be told, I have been wrestling with the way of Jesus most of my life. Hopefully it's not what Frederick Buechner entitled one of his books, "Whistling in the Dark," or what the first disciples called "an idle tale"?

But that's precisely the problem I have with Easter. On the one hand, Easter is the message of an empty tomb. It's the hope of new life, the belief that good will prevail, that the arc of the moral universe is long, but will bend toward justice. Easter is the good news that this victim God rose again from the grave to declare how divine love transforms hatred, faith prevails over fear, forgiveness overcomes condemnation, that new life can come even from the most horrific death-dealing ways, that the least, the last and the lost are valued, redeemed and found, that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus... That's the message we want to hear today. That's why we sing the most glorious music and affirm this crucified-risen Lord is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, that he shall reign for ever and ever...

But then, there are times when that seems like wishful thinking at best. As Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote after the death of his son, "To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer... My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question."<sup>1</sup> In these days of lingering COVID, Russian war crimes and threat of nuclear war, political incivility, racism and bigotry, Academy Award slap-downs, the ho-hum of another mass shooting in California and the NYC subway, and climate change, it's tempting to think the arc of the moral universe simply bends more toward chaos!

One of my favorite sayings is, "With God, even when nothing's happening, something's happening." Did you catch that? "With God, even when nothing's happening, something is happening!" At the end of his spiritual biography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis shares how Easter went from being an "idle tale" to a life-changing trail, the way of the cross, following Jesus' alternative lifestyle of forgiveness and self-giving love which brought an abundance of joy.

And so here's what I'd like for you to consider this Easter morning! Easter is not just a holiday, it's not just an idea. Easter is a *way of life*... the way of Christ, what Eugene Peterson called, "A long obedience in the same direction." And most days of Easter life there isn't the fanfare and glory of today. It can even seem mundane. Lewis' describes his conversion literally as a bus ride. He took a bus to the park. When he got *on* the bus, he was *not* a Christian. When he got *off* the bus, he *was*.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Wehner, "A Christian Response to Suffering," *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2022.

No bells, whistles or inspiring sermons for him. Lewis studied and wrestled with the faith for years, and then salvation came while he rode on the top of a bus one afternoon. From one bus stop to the next he became a follower of Jesus...

I wonder how many of us are waiting for something extraordinary to happen. Maybe we don't often come to church, but today is Easter, and we can't miss Easter! Truth be told, I still like a good Easter Egg hunt and chocolate eggs! I can't wait to sing the Hallelujah chorus and hear Terry play Widor's *Toccata* at the end of the service! But what are we really expecting to find? Is there something out of the ordinary that is going to happen *to us* this morning? I wonder...

In some ways, the Easter story is astonishing, incredible. High drama... His enemies killed Jesus. His disciples were hiding. Only a few, mostly women like Mary Magdalene, had dared to stand near the cross or come near to the tomb. Mary went to anoint Jesus' body for burial. And as the grieving women approached the tomb, their hearts sank even further. Not only had their Lord died, but it appeared someone had taken his body away. As they stared in shock and disbelief, something more astounding happened. An angel appeared. Luke records, "While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen....'"

As the women ran to tell the other disciples, their tears of grief turned to tears of joy. The women told what they had seen to the apostles. And Luke writes, "But these words seemed to them *an idle tale*, and they did not believe them." The disciples were too busy worrying about what they were going to do to stay alive themselves. Their leader was dead! Their illusions of the Kingdom of God were shattered.

But here's what we cannot miss in this Easter account: The women were going about a simple act of service. They were performing one of the mundane, painful tasks of love while the disciples were plotting their escape. And who were the first to know the Good News? Who were the ones privileged to bear that first message we now call the Gospel? It was the women who did the simple acts of love when it seemed there was no point in going on, nothing more to hope for, nothing more to be gained. During a simple act of love Easter came alive and they were filled with joy.

Too often we're simply trying to save our own necks and get on with life. We don't have time for service. We don't have time for forgiveness. We don't have time for those small insignificant acts of compassion and care. But today, I want you to consider exchanging the Easter *holiday*, even the Easter *idea* for *this Easter way of life*. It starts with Maundy Thursday and Jesus' example of servant leadership bending on knee and washing feet. It is revealed fully on Good Friday when Jesus offers his life as an atonement rather than revenge. Forgiveness rather than judgment... Easter, you see, will remain just another saccharine Hallmark holiday until we learn to live like Easter people!

Fyodor Raychynets is a theologian from the *Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary* in Kyiv. Rather than leave, Fyodor chose to stay and serve the people of his church. He says he has to remind himself "on a daily basis that we are humans and that it is crucial in the midst of the hell of war not to lose our humanity, to preserve it and to show it and demonstrate it because that's what the people need the

most at this moment.”<sup>2</sup> Fyodor is an example of the Easter way of life, maintaining one’s humanity in the midst of unspeakable barbarity, choosing to serve, to be an instrument of God’s peace and love in the face of violence and hatred.

This year, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim holidays converge. Maundy Thursday, we remember how Jesus redefined the Seder meal, identifying himself both with the Liberator God and the Paschal Lamb that would protect the oppressed slaves. The Easter way of life calls us to identify and engage ways that we can share God’s liberating work to free the captives, bring peace to victims of war, compassion to all.

This is the holiday of Ramadan, a time for the Muslim community to fast and help those in need. It’s important for us Christians to celebrate Easter and enjoy our feasting and frolicking, but first and foremost we must remember why God raised *this* Jesus from the dead! It is because he chose the way of *self-emptying love, of ultimate generosity, giving away his very life for the ransom of many!* Indeed, Jesus has done for us that which we could not do for ourselves, and he calls us to pick up our crosses, to share in his death so we also can share in his resurrection.

The question is, what needs to be crucified in us so we can experience resurrection power? What act of worship or service will free us to meet the risen Lord? After two years of the pandemic, some of us need to rediscover community. Some need to say goodbye to a loved one. Some are clinging to a dream that isn't coming true, and we need to let go. For others there are old, destructive patterns that die hard. We all need to consider the ways in which we can serve one another. We all have something to let go of; we all have something to receive and share.

It's important to realize that *believing* in the resurrection of Christ is only a precursor to *living* in the resurrection of Christ. Easter living transforms the lost things of our lives... Instead of bringing back our loved ones, it enables us to live with the hope that one day we will meet again. Easter living finds in us the pit of despair and shines a ray of hope. Easter living receives the grace that allows us to forgive. Easter living reminds us that to maintain our humanity sometimes requires sacrifice and suffering.

"With God, even when nothing's happening, something is happening!" I believe that. C. S. Lewis experienced that on the bus to the park. Fyodor is realizing that as he cares for his neighbors in Ukraine. Mary learned that from Jesus. That's what the whole cowering bunch of disciples discovered Easter morning, despite their fear and doubt that it was all just an idle tale.... The crucified-risen Lord met them right where they were and called them forward to new life. And friends, I believe that same Lord meets us here today and calls us to be an Easter people. May God move us each day from fear and doubt to the Easter way; from Easter believing to Easter living!

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Raychynets, quoted in a podcast, “A Voice from Kyiv: Fyodor Raychynets / Faithful Presence in the War on Ukraine (*For the Life of the World / Yale Center for Faith and Culture*), referenced April 11, 2022: [https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/a-voice-from-kyiv-fyodor-raychynets-faithful/id1505076294?i=1000554072619&fbclid=IwAR1SqYkriqKtatKVjRmCn6J7BN0nMpGz2ucOsNqJFhyAl0D3hd11\\_Jg8\\_0U](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/a-voice-from-kyiv-fyodor-raychynets-faithful/id1505076294?i=1000554072619&fbclid=IwAR1SqYkriqKtatKVjRmCn6J7BN0nMpGz2ucOsNqJFhyAl0D3hd11_Jg8_0U)