

***“These Words Seemed ... an Idle Tale”***

In the name him who has risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity, dear friends in Christ: If I were to begin a story with the words “Once upon a time in a land far away”, and then proceeded to tell you of an enchanted kingdom where everything was going along just fine and dandy until one day a fearsome fire-breathing dragon came along and began terrorizing the inhabitants; and how the king called upon his champions to kill the dragon, but none could do it; so he sent his appeal far and wide promising to give his lovely daughter in marriage to the man who could defeat the dragon; and how at last such a hero appeared, bravely facing the dragon, slaying it, and then was awarded his prize and everyone lived happily ever after – if I were to tell you all that, you’d know that I was spinning you an idle tale.

And several things would tip you off; like, for example, the nonspecific time and place references. When did this happen? Where? Who knows? That information is not provided. It’s deliberately left unstated. Then there’s the cliché nature of the story: kingdom in crisis, problem can’t be solved, hero saves the day, boy gets the girl ... it’s so predictable. And then there are all the obvious fictional elements. There are no enchanted kingdoms, there are no fire-breathing dragons, and in the end, in this fallen world, no one ever really lives happily ever after. That only happens in storybooks – storybooks full of idle tales.

And that’s what the disciples of Jesus thought the women who went to the tomb were telling them: a silly made-up story. The stone rolled away? The tomb standing open? No body found inside? Angels proclaiming that he’d risen from the dead? Don’t be ridiculous. It can only be an idle tale.

Although ... it’s not like their story had the telltale marks of an idle tale. Their account didn’t lack specifics. I mean, it wasn’t “once upon a time in a land far away”. No, the time was shortly after dawn on the first day of the week in a certain month of a certain year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius. And the place was Jerusalem; to be more precise, at the newly hewn garden tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea – the place where body of Jesus had been laid. And the disciples knew all the people involved. They had the names of the women who went to the tomb. They knew these women well and trusted them – usually. They weren’t given to telling idle tales. And considering the crushing disappointment they’d all suffered, and the grief they were experiencing now, this was hardly something they’d make up a story about just to pull the disciples’ legs. That kind of joke wouldn’t be funny. So there were plenty of specifics – reliable specifics.

And we have to admit that there wasn’t anything cliché about the story. To be sure, nothing over the past few weeks had turned out the way the disciples predicted they would. For them it was always one surprise after another when they were with Jesus – culminating with his arrest and crucifixion. Despite what he had told them on numerous occasions, none of them saw that coming.

Well, what about obvious fictional elements? Let’s see: tombs can be opened. That’s easy. Bodies can be missing. It’s a bit unusual; but not impossible. And the disciples did believe in angels – angels who communicated important messages from the Lord to people at various times throughout Israel’s past. And if Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead, that kind of information would be worthy of angelic news. So it was certainly possible that the women had seen angels who spoke to them. And on top of all that they had seen Jesus do

many amazing things, to include raising the dead. Had he not just ten or so days earlier raised Lazarus who had been dead for four days? Did he not say at the time, "I am the Resurrection and the Life"? Had he not proven to them that he had power over death? Then why was it so hard for them to believe that Jesus, whom they had all confessed to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God, was now raised from the dead? Why did this seem to them only an idle tale?

You see, the problem, my friends, was not with the story the women told. The problem was with the disciples who refused to take them seriously. The problem was their sinful skepticism and lack of faith in Jesus. The problem was their condition of spiritual darkness. They didn't believe because they couldn't believe. The Scriptures are very clear on this: those without the Spirit cannot receive the testimony of the Spirit, for such things are spiritually discerned.

We sometimes imagine that our Christian faith is merely an intellectual exercise. If I have all the facts, then I can believe on my own. That isn't the way it works. The disciples had all the facts and good reason to believe them. The testimony they received was solid. It was consistent with things they knew to be true. And it was the kind of good news that they would want to believe. But they couldn't. They weren't able to believe. To be sure, even the women who went to the tomb, found it open, and heard the angels speak were skeptical about the resurrection. St. John informs us that even after all this, Mary Magdalene went back to the tomb and stood there crying. When she was asked why she was upset, she said, "They've taken the body of my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him." She still didn't believe that Jesus had actually risen from the dead.

What changed them? How did they go from unbelievers to believers? The answer is simple. They had physical encounters with the Lord Jesus. They saw him. They heard him. They touched him. They dined with him. But more importantly, they received from Jesus the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit who brought light to their darkness, breathed life into their souls dead in sin, and who gave them the gift of faith. They were *made* believers by the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead. They were raised from death in sin and unbelief to spiritual life with him.

If you are a believer, the same thing happened to you. You had a physical encounter with the Lord Jesus when you were baptized. By water and Word Jesus touched you and washed away your sins. And he gave you his Holy Spirit whereby you too came to believe the good news. And now he continues to feed your faith as he comes to you in his Word. As the Scriptures are read, you hear his life-giving voice. When I proclaim to you the forgiveness of sins, it's Jesus who is speaking to you. And when you kneel here at the altar for Holy Communion, you are dining with and on the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. You are having a physical encounter with him.

And yes, I know, the world at large looks on and says it's all only an idle tale. They think that we are silly and deluded for believing the things we do. Tragically, even within churches that bear Christ's name there are many who deny the resurrection of Jesus. In such places it's taught that Jesus was a good man who had lots of great ideas about life and love and human dignity and how we should all try real hard to get along and make the most of this life – because this is all there is. But Jesus is God's Son? Jesus died for sin? Jesus was raised from the dead? Don't be ridiculous. Such things simply do not happen.

Well, let me tell you what else doesn't happen. People who make up stories do not cast themselves in a negative light. They tend to gloss over their mistakes and make themselves look better than they actually were. But the disciples didn't do that. When they told the story of

Jesus – about his life, death, and resurrection – they made themselves look weak, sinful, and spiritually stupid. They described what really happened.

Let me tell you what else doesn't happen. People who make up idle tales do not risk life and limb to have their story cast abroad. And yet all the disciples were persecuted for their faith. All but one died a martyr's death. The one who wasn't martyred languished in exile. All they had to do to avoid their suffering was to say that they didn't believe in Jesus. But they couldn't deny him. They couldn't deny the truth. They couldn't deny what they believed about Jesus: namely, that he had been raised from the dead. You see, they knew what that meant. They knew that Jesus was going to raise them up too. They knew that just as they had been called to spiritual life by the power of the Holy Spirit, they were also going to be raised to physical life in the resurrection on the Last Day. They knew that the Lord who had defeated the power of sin by his death on the cross was going to raise them up sinless and whole and crown them with life eternal. They didn't care that others thought it was an idle tale. They didn't fear death, knowing that it wouldn't last. They knew the truth. And they died giving witness to that truth so that others would know and come to trust it too.

By God's grace we are among those who have received their testimony and who by the working of the Spirit believe. And thus it falls to us in our day to be like the women who went to the tomb and came back speaking words that others received as an idle tale; and like the disciples who also, when they were given the gift of faith by Jesus through the Spirit, did the same. And we can do this without fear, because no matter how hard it gets or what difficulties we may have to face, we know how the story ends for those who trust in Jesus – who know him, his grace, his mercy, his love, and the power of his resurrection: they all really and truly *live* happily *forever* after. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***