

Luke 24:1-12

Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4 While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5 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. 6 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Humanity must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 But 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.

Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.

This is a line from a poem by Richard Wilbur.

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The morning air is all awash with angels.

[from, "Love Calls Us to the Things of this World"]

This is Easter, so today of all days, the morning air is, indeed all awash with angels. And for that matter, as Luke tells it, the whole of the gospel, is awash with angels. Awash with angels as we usually think of them—the heavenly beings who intrude suddenly into people’s lives with startling news, like Gabriel announcing to Mary that she will bear the Messiah, and like the host of angels who sing to the shepherds and send them, running, to Bethlehem.

But there are other angels in Luke as well—angels who aren’t heavenly, but who are as earth-bound as you and I; because the word “angel” simply means

“messenger.” It’s the same root as the word “evangelist.” So in this morning’s passage, alone, there are at least seven angels, seven messengers—the two heavenly ones in white garments, and at least five human ones—the women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who are not named.

Seven angels, seven messengers, who share the news of Jesus’ resurrection.

Of course, not every messenger is the bearer of such glad tidings. In the 2009 movie, “The Messenger,” Ben Foster and Woody Harrelson play two Army officers whose task it is to break the news of soldiers’ deaths to their next-of-kin. It’s a horrendous task. We see them approach each door in their dress uniforms, ring the doorbell, then stand there, bracing themselves for what will come next. And what comes next is always, always, gut-wrenching. Because no matter how much earlier their soldier had died, up until that moment they were still alive to their families. So it isn’t just the news of death that the two officers are conveying—it is death itself.

With their grim task, these two men become the angels of death. And their uniforms do nothing to protect them, nothing to armor them—with every door that opens, with every mother or father or widow whom they see collapse in front of them, something of themselves begins to die, as well.

This, I think, is to be expected. So is the fact that no one they tell doubts their news. The two men *look* the part of official messengers, with their uniforms and their military bearing. And the families have been braced all along for just this kind of terrible tidings.

Just as we are braced. As much death as any of us has seen in our lives, as much as we hear on the news or read in the papers, is it any wonder that we sit up in bed with our hearts racing when the phone rings in the middle of the night? We have learned to expect bad news, and to believe bad news because the angels of death are all around us. No wonder the women fall to the ground in terror when they see the two angels at the open tomb.

We are not so prepared, though, when it’s good news. And the news that’s shared in today’s reading isn’t just good news: it’s the best news. The best possible news. That the one who had died so horribly in his own kind of war—a war against injustice and oppression, against the crippling power of sin—that Jesus wasn’t dead any longer, but was risen and alive.

We believe bad news because, with all we've seen and heard, it's so plausible. But news this good? It's no wonder no one believes it at first. The women have shown up to care for the body—to prepare it properly for burial. They are prepared for death, not for life.

And when, at the prodding of the two angels, they finally remember Jesus' words and go to share the news of his rising with his other disciples, the disciples don't believe *them*. They think it's just the idle talk of women. Women who, in that culture, had no standing and were not to be trusted. In fact, in a court of law it took the testimony of two women to equal the testimony of one man.

So, when the women went to tell the good news to the men, not only was the *message* implausible, but so were the messengers. They didn't have uniforms with stripes on their shoulders to give them credibility. They didn't have robes of dazzling white. All they had was themselves, and their own experience to share.

So I have to wonder, how many times have we, ourselves, missed or dismissed the angels of good news? It seems to be the curious habit of God to choose the most unlikely messengers. Poor fishermen. Tax collectors. Women.

Even the Message, himself—the Word Made Flesh—was just a poor carpenter's son from Nazareth, easily dismissed.

Maybe that's a flaw in God's communication plan. Or maybe that *is* the plan: not to keep the good news in the ethereal realm, far removed from real life—but to root it firmly in the earth: *this* earth. To have it borne on the unlikeliest of lips; to weave it into the lowliest objects and organisms.

Because as all-pervasive as the news of death is, the proclamation of life, of hope, of resurrection, is even more pervasive. It is woven into the very DNA of creation.

Last week in the Palm Sunday reading, when the Order-Keeper told Jesus to shut up the hosanna-shouting crowd, Jesus told them, "If *the crowd* were quiet, the very stones would shout."

And indeed they would—because all of creation shouts out the message of life. From the minute Boson particle that, at a word from God, exploded into a universe of galaxies and planets that keeps expanding and expanding; to the astonishing restorative powers of polluted rivers and oceans which, given half a chance,

cleanse themselves and return to health; to the stubborn stumps in any given garden that keep sending up new shoots no matter how many times we cut them down—the earth, itself, is a messenger of resurrection. It is just one of God’s many, surprising angels.

Two thousand years ago, a group of women approached a tomb with the same kind of dread those two soldiers felt as they approached each new door. Only the women found the door already open, and they left with a new message on their lips.

It may be an unlikely-sounding message, but it is our message now. The message that the one who was dead is now alive. And unlike the message of death, which kills the messenger little by little every time he shares it; every time we share the news of resurrection our spirits become more and more alive.

So, with each new planet being born, and every self-regenerated planarian worm we proclaim: Christ is risen.

With every wobbly-kneed fawn and each emerging dawn we declare: Christ is risen.

With poor women and thieves, and with every fisherman who believes we cry out: Christ is risen.

Christ is risen. That is our unlikely message, and we are the unlikely messengers to whom God has entrusted it. But we are not alone. Just stop and listen:

*Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.*

Men in dazzling white, women running fast to share good news, stones pushed aside, gardens gleaming with dew—this morning is awash, awash with angels, and we are all among them.