

# *Empty Tomb! Empty Talk?*

*But these words seemed to them an idle tale,  
and they did not believe them.*  
(Luke 24:11)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Easter Sunday, **April 1, 2018**

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Before I begin this morning's Easter sermon I need to report an astonishing thing which happened early this morning as I left for the sunrise service at Balboa Pavilion. Just as I was backing out of my driveway I jolted to a stop as my reverse warning began to beep. Looking back, with my own eyes I witnessed a bright, spinning craft floating softly down to settle in the middle of Resplendor Way, blocking my path to the pavilion. Who would ever dream such a thing possible? Surely not I!

Nor is that all I have to report. Two extraordinary creatures with an eerie glow dimly lighting the dark, emerged from the craft. Well, as you might imagine, I was terrified, until one of the dazzling ones spoke, telling me not to be afraid. Then, as suddenly as my Easter morning experience had begun, it was over. The craft lifted, gradually vanishing from view.

Is it a slight unease I sense rippling through the congregation? I see it on your faces, you can't hide it! Nor, I admit, am I surprised. It's no wonder you're skeptical. I would be, were the story yours to tell. Those alert to the calendar are by now thinking, "*Pastor, come on! I get it. It's April Fool's Day. You're taking advantage of the calendar quirk to make a point.*" Others may have been thinking, "*Is our pastor delirious? Has he lost his marbles?*"

Speaking of marbles. I propose a test, the test of the colored marbles. I'll have our ushers give each of you a little package containing four marbles of different colors -- black, gray, pink, and red. Next, the ushers will pass among you a clear plastic container, and I'll ask you to deposit one of four marbles into the jar as a test of how my story has been received: (1) If you think my report an outright fabrication, drop the black marble into the jar. A black marble means that, in your opinion, it's ludicrous to suggest a spaceship landed in the Village outside my house on Resplendor Way this Easter morning. (2) If you think my story probably false, but you're not willing to dismiss it totally from the realm of possibility, drop the gray marble in the jar. Remember, a gray marble means you doubt it very seriously, but you're not willing to say for sure that it couldn't have happened. (3) If you think my story is probably true, but you're not entirely convinced, place the pink marble inside the jar. Pink means you're suspicious, but you trust your pastor and wish to give him the benefit of the doubt. (4) Finally, if you think my story most assuredly the truth as to what happened in the wee morning hours of Easter 2018, proudly drop your red marble. Remember, red is the marble of faith.

When the voting is done, how much color do you think will be in that jar? Well, I can guess by your unbelieving looks. Black marbles will fill the jar, won't they? Not much color this morning at Christ of the Hills UMC! Well, then, okay! Cancel the test. I admit it. I made it all up. No bright spaceship and no shining ones. Nonsense. Untrue. I have this morning concocted for you an *Idle Tale*.

Do you recall that phrase from our text? "*These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*" The women had arrived from their early morning visit to the tomb with the astonishing message, "*Empty Tomb!*"

It was an incredible story and, not unlike my reporting to you this morning, their report was met with skepticism, incredulity. Why, even in a primitive age by measurements of today's scientific knowledge, people were in no way primitive in THIS knowledge -- then as now, they knew that what is dead stays that way. Risen from the dead? *An Idle Tale*, surely.

The Greek word translated *Idle Tale* is *leros*. You may not have noticed it, but it's the same *leros* I used earlier in this sermon. I framed it within our word, *Delirious*. De-leros. "*Is our pastor delirious?*" I asked. One who is *delirious* is filled idle tales, empty words. Who could blame the disciples for their initial disbelief, meeting this talk of an *Empty Tomb!* with question marks, wondering if these were *Empty Words?* Are these women *de-leros*, *delirious?*

Now, if you thought my story this morning to be outlandish, realize that many in today's world would sooner believe my story than Luke's! Visitors from outer space? Not so unbelievable to many in our scientific age which has come to realize that the universe is vast beyond our most courageous imaginings. We ourselves are beginning to reach out to and explore other worlds. Stories of E. T. visitors excite many in an X-Files, Roswell kind of way. No doubt many would believe my story before they would believe that a friend whom they laid in the grave three days ago might now be alive, walking, resurrected.

These 1<sup>st</sup> century disciples surely knew nothing of exploring other worlds, but they did know that their friend, their teacher, had died. Three days ago they had seen him crucified, hearing him cry out, *tetelestai*, "*It is finished.*" And so it was! Finished. "*Let us put away idle tales. Let's go back a-fishing in the Galilee!*"

Put to the test of the colored marbles, what verdict would this jury of eleven have rendered? How many pinks and reds, how much color would have been in that jar? Little, I fear. At least at first, their jar bore a dark hue of disbelief. And yet, in their case, it was more gray than black, maybe even a little pink. They had seen enough through this man's ministry of three years to put a question mark on the finality of death. No wonder that Peter raced to the tomb to investigate.

While I've concocted an idle tale this morning with my fabricated encounter with a spaceship, there's one part I did not invent -- the test of the colored marbles. With that I'm poking a bit of fun at a somewhat fringe group of bible scholars who for some thirty years conducted what became known as *Jesus Seminars*. In tribunal fashion they actually voted, just as I described with the colored marbles, seeking to ascertain their collective opinion on the historicity of the

sayings and the stories surrounding Jesus of Nazareth. You will perhaps not be surprised that black marbles have been much in demand at these seminars, the first held in Berkley, California in 1985. In many cases, the gospel records of Jesus' words and deeds are determined not to be authentic, but rather the result of many decades of emerging Christian tradition – later additions and redactions framing the gospel accounts we have. For the *Jesus Seminar*, the gospels describe not the historical Jesus but the Jesus who lived in the imagination of the early followers.

Ours is a world in which the scientific way of knowing holds sway. Faith in a creator God who has made himself known to his creatures, entered into covenant relationship with them, intervened in history when the Word became flesh, and now dying and rising again . . . well, for our world this story seems like an *Idle Tale*, embraced only by the *de-leros*. No wonder, then, when it comes to core issues of faith, black marbles are found in abundance.

Yet, perhaps when it comes to our individual lives, red marbles are in more abundance. *TIME* magazine published an article on the *Jesus Seminar* which asked this very question, “*with such a super-abundance of black marbles, can we still believe in miracles?*” The article tells of the Jernigan family of Raleigh, North Carolina, a family believing they experienced an outright miracle. At four months old their daughter, Elizabeth, developed a weak right eye. The pupil became fixed. A brain tumor was discovered. Exploratory surgery enabled surgeons to remove part of the tumor, but the rest of the tumor was too dangerous to attempt removal. The prognosis was an aggressively growing cancer. Paralysis and death were expected. Her condition worsened. Doctors decided on more surgery to implant shunts to drain the fluid off the brain. The night before surgery they removed so much infected fluid that they postponed the procedure.

Through it all, says Mr. Jernigan, the family, the church, the community, prayed. Twelve days later, there was no fluid, and no tumor. Surgery was performed to remove the scarred tissue of the nerve, leaving Elizabeth blind in one eye. But there were no other lesions. The pathologists could not discover any cancerous tissue whatsoever. The medical community called what happened a “*Spontaneous resolution.*” The family and church call it a miracle. Her dad says, “*in the years ahead, if you happen to see a young lady walking down the street with her right eye permanently closed, please don't think some tragedy has befallen her . . . have cheerful thoughts, knowing that the Holy Spirit dwells in her, and our God is powerful, benevolent, and magnificent.*”

Shall I pass out the marbles again? I suspect there would be more color in the jar, more color for the Jernigans of Raleigh, North Carolina. Not surprising. A recent NPR program reported on a Pew Research survey showing that nearly 80% of Americans believe in miracles, and I don't mean merely that we live in a world with an overload of astonishment – I mean miracles in their lives. I've heard some of you tell of miracles in your life, your family.

I read a sermon by Rev. Stephen Edington, who commented on this article in *TIME*. While he rejoiced in the miracle the Jernigans experienced, he offered his own story. When his father was, seemingly, a very healthy 69, he became ill with fainting spells and was treated for a minor stroke. After extensive tests, there were no indications otherwise. He would be well soon. Hope abounded as recovery seemed not only certain, but imminent.

Instead, suddenly, a few days later, he died, an autopsy revealing a brain tumor had hidden itself from their tests. So quick was his death that his doctors were at a loss to explain the tumor's sudden manifestation. "*As much at a loss,*" says Rev. Edington, "*as Elizabeth's doctors were in explaining that tumor's sudden disappearance.*" The Edington family, too, believes in a benevolent, powerful, and magnificent God, despite the lack of a healing miracle.

Or, he asks, was there a miracle of a different color? The miracle experienced by the Edington family was one of faith, hope and peace sustained a grieving family. Rev. Edington senses that the miraculous is not restricted to unexplained moments when natural laws seem to be laid aside. Even in the absence of a "miracle," the mystery of faith was manifested.

Are our red marbles only for those times when we hear stories of God circumventing the laws of nature? Or will we be emboldened to drop the red marble of faith in response to the miracles we see all around us, made all the more meaningful in light of the resurrection of Christ? In Easter's bold proclamation of the *Empty Tomb!* we affirm that death, while always with us, is changed. And we find that both a miracle and a mystery.

C. S. Lewis said after the death of a friend, "*When the thought of Charles Williams and the thought of death came together in my mind, it was the thought of death that was changed.*" What a remarkable statement. Normally, when we think of the death of a friend, it is the thought of our friend that changes. Death seems the eternal constant, the never-changing reality. What a remarkable thing to think of death as altered, changed, conquered by life.

It was just so for the disciples. Oh, not at first, at the black marble stage of their hearing. At first, it was their thought of Jesus that changed, not death. They had trusted it was he who would redeem Israel. Death dismayed them as their savior was laid to rest – dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

But as the message of Easter filled their hearts, they knew death had changed, defeated by this Jesus who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. These, for the community of faith, are not *Empty Words . . . Christos aneste! (Christ is Risen!)*

*He is Risen Indeed!*

Sources and notes:

I found and loved the idea of opening an Easter sermon with the "*Idle Tale*" of space visitors from a sermon by Bishop William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 23, No. 2.

Nancy Gibbs, "*Can We Still Believe in Miracles?*" in TIME, April 10, 1995.

