

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
April 20, 2025
Easter Sunday
Luke 24:1-12

Risen Christ, on this morning of joy and astonishment, we come carrying the world's wounds, yet yearning to be surprised by your life-giving grace. We come, like the women at the tomb, carrying what we thought was the end—only to hear your question: *“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”*

Break open our assumptions. Interrupt our despair. Speak your holy “But...” into all our tombs of fear, and call us—again and again—into resurrection hope.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Stone Rollers”

What a curious way for Luke to begin his Easter story, don't you think? Not the part about the women going to the tomb – that's common for all the Gospel writers – I mean that part about beginning it with a conjunction. Did you notice that? “But . . .” Luke begins, “on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb . . .”

A conjunction, you might recall, is a word that connects two phrases, words or clauses. The word “and” is a conjunction (as in, we have lilies and other flowers this morning), and so is the word “or” (you may prefer one or the other). Yet the word “but” joins two conflicting ideas (lilies are beautiful but some people are allergic).

I point this out because it's almost as if Luke wants us to know right up front that the Easter story he tells is a rebuttal to what some people want you to hear. And I hadn't noticed that until this year. Unlike those other Gospel writers, Luke's account is peppered with the word *but*. In Matthew, the word shows up only one time; in Mark, it appears twice; but in Luke—in only 12 verses—that defiant conjunction (*but*) shows up six times. It's as if Luke is grabbing us by the lapels, stopping us in our tracks and forcing us to understand that no matter what we

may have heard, we haven't heard the whole story yet. So he begins his story in a curious way, with a tenacious conjunction. *But* on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb . . .

You see, just two days prior to this the women had witnessed Jesus die and saw Joseph of Arimathea take his body down from the cross, wrap it in linen cloth, and place it in the tomb. With their very own eyes the women saw all of it. And then they went home determined to give him a proper burial, so they prepared their spices and oils and waited for the Sabbath to end so they could do what needed to be done.

When the Sabbath is over they go to the tomb, and there they see the stone has been rolled away from the entrance. They're perplexed, which puts them in a long line of faithful Biblical people. If I came here this morning perplexed, maybe here out of tradition or here to make someone happy but you're not sure what you believe, you're in good company. The women weren't sure what to make of it all, either.

So they head inside. They don't see Jesus' body, yet they do see two men in dazzling clothes. This scares them so much they bow their faces to the ground, which is Luke's polite way of saying they fell to the ground and put their faces in the dirt.

But (there's that word again) those men in dazzling clothes tell them something that defies all expectation. "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

At this jog of their memory, the women do remember. So well, in fact, they leave the tomb and proceed to tell the 11 disciples and the rest what they had just witnessed. Emboldened, faith-filled, and no longer afraid, these women are the first ones to witness to the resurrection.

But no sooner do they share their testimony than the disciples dismiss it as an idle tale. The Greek word used here is *leros*, meaning "trash, garbage, or bull." Those women, the men think, they don't know what they're talking about – an experience with which too many women are all too familiar. So when the women

announce “Christ is Risen” (let the congregation respond) ...the disciples do not say that (jump up and exclaim, “He is Risen Indeed!”) Instead they shout back “Leros! We don’t believe you.”

But in all fairness to the disciples, is it any wonder? They, too, witnessed Jesus die. They, too, saw their hopes and dreams die. And when you’re that far down the rabbit hole of grief and bad news, it can be hard to remember the good times, or the words shared and see flickering embers of hope. It’s easy to believe the other storyteller, the one Luke is so desperately wanting us not to believe. You know the one, where death has the final word, and Jesus’s body is found in the tomb, just the way Joseph left him. The one where the story ends on Friday?

Can we just take a moment to acknowledge that the resurrection is not what anyone expected and sometimes it’s not what we expect? That there is a reason Luke grabs us by the lapels and tries to shake that other storyteller loose from us?

Can we just take a moment to acknowledge the truth in what William Sloan Coffin once said, that it really does feel at times like we live in a Good Friday world?

Let’s take, for example, the arson attack on Gov. Shapiro’s residence, the governor of PA. It occurred shortly after his family and other members of the local Jewish community had celebrated the first night of Passover, a night rooted in the story of deliverance and freedom. Friends, that story was not even the top news story of the day. Have we become so immune to stories of political violence that they no longer faze us?

Or what about the two school shootings that happened just last week? Have we become so immune to those stories that we take them as commonplace? I remember when Columbine was shocking and unheard of. Do you?

But do we really live like the resurrection is true? It’s a fair question, even if we may not want to hear it, because the world gives us so many reasons to doubt. This is why Luke tries to grab us by the lapels and shake us loose from our disbelief. Luke knows there’s another storyteller preaching a half-gospel of Good Friday; a half gospel that just cannot get past the hopeless finality of the crucifixion.

Friends, that storyteller—that voice of fear and despair—is powerful. It shows up in every generation, trying to drown out resurrection hope with easy certainties about how the world works. And I'll be honest: some days, I find myself believing him. I'm not proud of that. But I hear that voice pushing a version of life that's cynical, oppressive, and rooted in hatred and fear. It thrives when we give up, when we stay silent, when we accept things as they are. So is it any wonder we keep returning to the tombs of our fears and divisions? It's familiar. It's what we know. And deep down, we don't really expect to find anything different—just the same broken, lifeless world we left behind.

But God does. And God does God's best work in places just like that. Yousee, Resurrection doesn't need our certainty—it only needs only our willingness to look again. And when we do, we find that what we thought was over is only the beginning. That love has moved the stone. That hope is already on the loose. And it starts with a single, small, defiant word:

But.

But the stone was rolled away.

But the body wasn't there.

But the women remembered his words.

But the disciples dismissed them as an idle tale.

But Peter ran anyway.

Peter ran to the tomb. He didn't stay stuck in fear or regret—he ran. And when he got there, he didn't find what he expected. The stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, and suddenly, the old story—the one that said death has the final word—started to fall apart. In that moment, Peter confronted the storyteller. The one who said, "It's over." The one who said, "You failed." The one who said, "This is just the way things are."

And we are called to do the same; to confront that false storyteller who lives in our lives and in this world. Friends, God puts a tremendous amount of responsibility into our hands because Easter morning is God's clearest statement that the world is different and that those who follow in the pathway of the risen Lord are called to live differently. The good news is not something to observe; it is something that demands. It demands we run toward hope instead of away from it. It demands we question the voice that tells us to settle for less, to stay afraid,

to stop believing that love can change anything. Because *He is risen*—and that means the story we’ve been told isn’t the one we have to keep living.

And so we run to the tombs in our own lives—tombs of fear, injustice, division, despair—and we confront the storyteller. The one who insists that violence is inevitable, that hate is stronger than love, that nothing new can grow from what’s been broken. And just like Peter, we look. We look again. We challenge the story we’ve been told, and we dare to believe that resurrection might just be real.

And you know what? I know you can do it because I’ve seen you do it here at First Pres over and over again. When you choose Jesus’ way of compassion over comfort, welcome over protection, and courage over fear, you’re confronting that false storyteller. I’ve seen you roll away the stone when you gather at tables with people who look, live, or believe differently, and say, “Let’s talk. Let’s get to know one another.”

I’ve seen it when this church refuses to let the world’s divisions define us—when we strive not for uniformity, but for a unity rooted in grace. That’s the stone rolling away.

We will roll away the stone next week at Hands On Fort Wayne when we go out into the city serving and helping and making this city a better place to live, work, and play. Some of you will roll away the stone this afternoon when you serve dinner at the Rescue Mission. We will roll away the stone next Saturday when we welcome all those art students from South Side and say to this city, “South Side is an awesome high school!”

I’ve seen it when people who’ve been wounded by the church take one more risk and walk into a coffee with the pastors—guarded, but still hoping. That’s what it looks like when love rolls the stone away.

I’ve seen it on stage in our theater, or in concerts and gallery shows, when we give voice to those who have been long silenced.

And I’ve seen it when we hold vigils, write letters, show up, speak out—not because it’s easy, but because we believe the world can still be changed by justice, by kindness, by mercy.

Friends, that’s the power of *but*.

The world says: "This is just the way it is."
But we say: "It doesn't have to be."
The world says: "People don't change."
But we say: "Grace says otherwise."
The world says: "Death wins."
But God says: "Life has the final word."

This is our testimony—not just today, but every day:
Stones roll away.
Hope walks out of tombs.
And love refuses to stay buried.

So if today you can't quite believe it—if all of this still sounds like an idle tale—let us believe it for you. Let us hold the hope until you can hold it again for yourself. Because resurrection is already on the loose. The stone is already rolling. The old story is already unraveling.

And we will keep telling this story—this *but*-soaked, stone-breaking, tomb-emptying story—until every voice echoes the truth:
The Lord is risen.
He is risen indeed.
Amen.

Sources:

Ted Wardlaw, Christian Century commentary from March 2007, for his thoughts on Luke's use of the word "but" which shaped the arc of the sermon.

Commentary for Luke 24 from Feasting on the Gospels, Volume 3, Book 4.