

“An Idle Tale”

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It seemed to them an idle tale. It seemed to them the story of some grief stricken women who could not see clearly or think straight. Ridiculous just talk. The common everyday garden variety of people's over active imagination. It still seems that way to many.

Last week I was driving to work and I pulled up along side a city or county bus. I glanced over at it and then glanced again. There was a huge advertising sign on the side of the bus. I don't know who or what the sign was advertising but the words were clear. It said, "Knowledge lasts forever, love is fleeting."

Knowledge lasts forever? I don't think so. As we age, our synapses do not connect as fast as they used to. Ever have a senior moment? Those names and places and dates just don't seem to stay fixed in your mind like they used to do.

When you are lying on your deathbed are you going to be comforted by the fact that you have a diploma hanging on the wall or stuffed in a forgotten box in some corner of the garage? Maybe you have two or three diplomas from various universities and with impressive names. Will those diplomas comfort you? Will it be a great comfort to you to know you have amassed a great collection of books? Or that you have a huge collection of Hummel figurines and know more about them than any of your friends? Or that you know the intricate workings of antique clocks or what ever?

I don't think so. The only thing that counts at the end is love. When you are getting ready to die, you want the comfort of those who love you. You want family and friends.

Well, I know I may be out of step with the secular world, but I still think that love is the only thing that lasts forever.

What do you think? Do you think that Christ is not dead, but alive?

The question is not an idle one, not just something to read on a bus and wonder about while you are sipping your coffee. We might wonder why it was that Cain killed Abel, or what did it smell like on Noah's ark? Then we can rinse out our coffee mug and go on about the day and never give the matter another thought. We can live without knowing the answer, we can live with those questions unfinished, undecided.

But not this question.

In this question, there is everything at stake. It's a great deal more than an ordinary question about death. I think what is at stake is the question about life and how we are to endure the living of it.

Because if this is an idle tale, then we must acknowledge that we live in a world where love, even the love of a man like Jesus, is powerless and sentimental. If the tale told by the women is just an idle story, then we live in a world where there is no power stronger than the sin that kills us, the greed, jealousy, the hatred, the lust for violence that binds us like the strips of cloth that bound Jesus for the grave. If this is an idle tale then we too might as well be bound up with grave cloths like Lazarus. Because then the world is nothing more than a conglomeration of atoms with no moral purpose and history is just a scrambling after wealth and power.

If this women's story is an idle tale then we have nothing to say to the people in Littleton, Colorado and the people on the Iron Range in northern Minnesota, whose towns both had children bring guns and open fire on other children at school. We would have nothing to say to those people who have tried to cross the Mexican border into America and have died of thirst. We would have nothing to say to the San Jose family whose beloved son was killed by friendly fire in Iraq. We would have nothing to say to the woman who came to church with a black eye, given to her by her husband. If this is an idle tale and we have nothing to say, then there is no power that can lift us out of the abyss of hell, and our faith is futile, and we are a people to be pitied.

Don't try to tell my friend Lila, that it is an idle tale. I met Lila in Monterey. She was a retired army colonel who was called back into service after 9-11 to help hunt Al Qaida. Lila had spent most of her long military career as an undercover intelligence officer. She said that 95% of intelligence officers are not covert. She spoke 5 languages fluently and was a specialist on the Middle East. She was also married to an army officer and they had several grown children. One day we were talking about the reality TV show, *Survivor*. Lila got really angry and upset. I knew that Lila was a practicing Catholic, but we had never talked about spiritual matters before. That day Lila told me that as a covert officer she had suffered and been deprived of many things for long periods of time in her life. She said she had been deployed away from her husband and growing children. She had often been in harms way and often suffered because she couldn't digest some of the food she was forced to eat when nothing else was available in remote parts of the world. Some assignments were dangerous; some were confining and boring for months on end. All of it had been hard and difficult work. "I did it," she

explained to me, “because God gave me the gifts and abilities and gave me the opportunities to serve. I served because of my faith in Christ. I served because I believed that I was helping to save and liberate oppressed people as Jesus wanted me to. I can’t watch people on television eating bad food and suffering privations just to get money. It makes a mockery out of real suffering for a faith that you are willing to stake your life on.”

You can’t tell Lila that the women told an idle tale, and Jesus is not raised because she knows differently.

And don’t try to tell my friend Linda, a woman who had two small children when her husband was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor who she nursed at home for two years before he died. Linda raised her children by herself; now she is a charter school teacher who teaches children at home when they are unable to function appropriately at school. She teaches children who are ill. She teaches adults who never learned to read. She teaches children who have behavior problems because their parents are drug addicts. She also is raising two foster children and is an accomplished artist. One day I asked her, “Linda how did you live through it all? How did you manage to get through your husband’s death at such a young age?” She looked surprised that I would ask her. She smiled though and said, “you know, one day after my husband knew he was dying, but was still able to get around easily, we went on a short hike to a waterfall that was back in the woods near our home in Santa Rosa. Larry walked ahead of me,” she said. “I noticed when we got close to the waterfall, he took off his cap and he walked with both his arms outstretched toward the waterfall that was back lit by the sun. I just knew he was walking on sacred ground and he was rehearsing walking toward the light of Christ. That’s how I

make it through everything, walking toward the light of Christ. Don't you see it in my pictures?" she asked. A couple months ago, Linda sent me color print of her latest painting. It was a painting of an ear of corn. The corn was on its stalk and it was just ripening a golden yellow. The plant was back lit by the early morning sun. She had named the painting "epiphany" She said she had gone out one morning to her garden and the rising sun just shone and seemed to light up that ear of corn.

Like the women at the tomb, Linda and Lila both remembered what Jesus had told them. In remembering what Jesus said, the tale became not idle, but alive and true. The next time you find yourself entombed in darkness remember what Jesus said. Hang onto it for dear life.

When the tale is no longer idle, we find ourselves living in a different world. Yes, it is a world where there is evil and suffering, but there is a mystery deeper still. And since resurrection morning we have something to say to those children on the deadly play ground in Littleton and in northern Minnesota. We have something to say to the mother who bears children for calamity or the woman fettered in fear. We have something to say to the man who grieves the loss of his partner after 50 years. And what we have to say is this:

There is a power that is stronger than whatever binds you to death. That is the power of our gracious and loving God, who unleashed this love to the world at the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is love-- not sin, or greed, or lust, or evil, or knowledge, or even death that lasts forever.

Friends, if you celebrate Easter because it is the beginning of spring, and it is something natural and lovely when nature wakes up from its long winter sleep, then you need to go out and color eggs and eat chocolate ducks.

But if you have ever found yourself entombed in darkness, so that you know this is just not a lovely tale about spring, but a tale about grief and suffering and the power of sin, then you know the empty tomb is not about waking up from slumber, but about standing up against the powers of injustice in the world. When you know that Easter is about the power of God to love in the world, then grab hold and hang onto those words of Jesus for dear life. Grab on and hang on to that empty cross that is surrounded by glorious blooming flowers.