

Unnatural event: Luke 24:1-12

by [Ted Wardlaw](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

Chances are that your world is either experiencing or anticipating an awakening earth after months of winter slumber. Grass is turning green, azaleas are splashing the landscape with brilliant reds, dogwoods are sprouting pink and white blooms—little Easter catechisms shaped like crosses and complete, each one, with a crown of thorns. When the birds begin their morning songs these days, and the bees their carpentry, we imagine that the sounds they make are Easter music served up by nature, as the church's most important holy day coincides with the renewed activity of creation.

So effortless is this connection between springtime and Easter that, unless we are vigilant, we succumb to thinking that resurrection is as natural a thing as grass coming up green, as eggs cracking open to reveal chicks, as butterflies crawling out of cocoons. As beautiful as this coincidence is, there is something deceptive about it too, and we need to remember that there is nothing about resurrection that is natural.

The Gospel writers have their own ways of making this point. Mark writes that when the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices they discover the impossible—the stone has been rolled away and an angel is sitting where Jesus should have been lying stiff and cold. They flee in “terror and amazement.” Matthew adds an earthquake, and an angel that frightens the guards until they shake and become like dead men.

John gives us a mystified Mary Magdalene encountering someone she assumes is the gardener but who turns out to be Jesus. When she calls him by a familiar name, he says, “Do not hold on to me,” as if to suggest that now, after the resurrection, everything is oriented not toward what is familiar, but toward a new thing that is about to happen.

Luke suggests something I have not noticed much until this year. Unlike those of the other Gospel writers, his account is peppered with the word *but*. But on the first day of the week at early dawn, Luke says, they came to the tomb with the spices that

they had prepared. In Matthew the word shows up once; in Mark, twice; and 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've heard, we haven't heard the whole story yet. So he begins that 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 . . .

What is Luke up to with this stubborn, defiant, relentless conjunction ? Luke suspects that there's another storyteller loose in the world, one who preaches a half-gospel of Good Friday that cannot get past the hopeless finality of the crucifixion. I hear evidence myself of that other storyteller still trying to promote everything about our world that does not give life, but is instead cynical, oppressive and tyrannical and survives best on a diet of our passivity. That storyteller is persuasive and is in every age eager to subvert resurrection faith with premature certainties about the way things are—until, at the end of the day, we are persuaded that there was never an Easter at all.

In a church I used to serve, I once invited a guest preacher from the National Baptist tradition for our annual Good Friday service. I loved what he had to say on that occasion, and especially how he so effectively got us Presbyterians loosened up enough to utter out loud an occasional Amen. But what I loved the most was the ascription that he gave after he finished reading the crucifixion story which was his text. It was not the usual "The Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God." Instead he said, "May God bless you, and may God protect you from the enemy who would try to steal the Word from you."

Luke is worried about that enemy in his Easter text. As I read news of war, poverty and political corruption, I worry about that enemy too, that other storyteller who is so very effective at trying to steal the Easter word from us.

*But* . . . if Jesus Christ really rose from the dead, then that means that he is loose in the world with power to raise us up from whatever is dragging us down—power to complete what we can't complete by ourselves. It means that the story of hopeless finality that that other storyteller is peddling is, in the end, nothing but Friday talk. So we get ready for Resurrection Day, when what gets proclaimed from the empty tomb is a rebuttal so dramatic, so *unnatural* as to serve as the very hinge of history by which we divide all of time. The story Luke is telling receives and absorbs every ounce of hatred, determinism and self-fascination that the world can dish out. Then

it continues on with this announcement: “*But* on the first day of the week, at early dawn . . . the men [in dazzling clothes] said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, *but* has risen.’”

The gospel, as Karl Barth once put it, “is not a natural therefore but a miraculous nevertheless.” Perhaps it is in truth a defiant conjunction itself, which, if we can dare to speak it until it speaks us, will enable us to follow faithfully the purposeful steps of the one who is present with us today—at table when we make Eucharist, and across the landscape of the whole world—one who is not dead *but* . . .