

Empty tomb, empty talk: Easter Sunday, April 15

*Luke 24:1-12*

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [April 4, 2001](#) issue

On a Sunday morning in a certain city church, the Gospel lesson had been read and the minister was about to begin the sermon. Suddenly a stranger seated in the balcony stood up and interrupted the service. "I have a word from the Lord!" he shouted. Heads whipped around, and ushers bounded up the balcony stairs like gazelles. They managed to escort the man into the street before he could elaborate further on just what "word" he had been given.

Week after week, preachers in countless pulpits stand up and say, in effect, the same thing as the man in the balcony: "I have a word from the Lord!" But no alarms sound, no one is astonished and no apprehensive ushers race forward to muscle the preacher into the street. If a sudden unexpected shout erupts from the balcony, the place gets set on edge, but when a preacher starts into the Gospel word for the day, people crease their bulletins and settle in. No wonder some clergy, in hopes of putting a little electricity into the sermon event, have taken to wandering the aisles Oprah-like with handheld mikes.

It is somewhat reassuring to realize that the first Christian sermon ever preached did not register high on the Richter scale either. When the women came back from the cemetery on Easter morning, they brought with them word of an empty tomb and astonishing news: "He is not here but has risen!" All Christian preaching begins here, and all Christian sermons are reverberations of this Easter news, first announced by the women to the apostles. The response? The translations differ; you can take your pick. The words seemed to them like "an idle tale," "empty talk," "a silly story," "a foolish yarn," "utter nonsense," "sheer humbug."

Why? The women have come with a revolutionary announcement, "He is risen!" so why did the apostles dismiss the first news of Easter with a wave of the hand? Some have suggested that this initial Easter proclamation was poorly received because the messengers were women. "From women let not evidence be accepted," reads the

*Mishna*, "because of the levity and temerity of their sex."

The gender of the speakers may be part of the reason for the apostles' indifference, but not all of it. After all, the women were confirming a message that Jesus himself had already told the disciples. Before he entered Jerusalem, Jesus informed them that he would be killed but that on the third day he would rise. When the women came racing back with the news that these words had come to pass, the disciples should have been prepared, eager, receptive, believing. Instead they yawned, checked their watches and wondered when the sermon would end so that they could shuffle off to coffee hour.

Maybe the news of Easter was simply too overwhelming for them to believe. Many years ago, a friend told me that his young son was a great fan of both Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. The boy faithfully watched both of their television shows, and one day it was announced that Mister Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. The boy was ecstatic. Both of his heroes, together on the same show! Every morning the boy would ask, "Is it today that Mister Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?" Finally the great day arrived, and the whole family gathered around the television. There they were, Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo together. The boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly, got up and wandered from the room.

Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, "What is it, son? Is anything wrong?"

"It's too good," the boy replied. "It's just too good."

Maybe that's it. Maybe the news of the empty tomb, the news of the resurrection, the news of Jesus' victory over death is just too good to believe, too good to assimilate all at once.

One suspects, however, a deeper and more complex reason for writing off the women's proclamation. Like the Emmaus Road travelers in the story that follows, the disciples are not merely bored, they are "slow of heart to believe." They are not just indifferent to the news of Easter; they are resistant. Perhaps a clue can be found in what the disciples are called in this story. Initially Luke tells us that the women told the news of resurrection to "the eleven," but later he changes their title to "the apostles," to those who are *sent*.

If the Jesus story ended on Friday, then the disciples can simply be "the eleven," and after the appropriate rituals and a season of mourning, they can go back to life as it was. If the story ended on Friday, then they can be "the eleven," alumni of Jesus' school of religion, students of an inspiring though finally tragic teacher. In short, if the story ends on Friday, we can close out the Book of Luke.

But if the news of Sunday is true, they must become "apostles," those sent to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. There will be arrests and shipwrecks and outpourings of the Spirit and persecutions and gentiles and stonings and miles of weary travel. If we believe the news of Sunday, then the scary truth is that the story is just beginning and we will need a Book of Acts with the apostles as its main actors.

Perhaps this Easter the preacher should climb not into the pulpit but into the balcony to say, "I have a word from the Lord!" Maybe this time it will be the congregation that heads into the street—sent with good news to the ends of the earth.