

# “And I Hope...”

Sermon for Easter Sunday, March 31 2024

Luke 24:1-12

Rev. Emily M. Brown

For Christmas, Bailes gave me a fancy indoor garden. It’s a vertical garden, which means that there are these vertical columns, with little spots up and down the columns for plants to grow, and it has an electronic system that turns the lights on and off on a schedule, it has a water tank on a timer, and little piping things that send water to the plants. I had seen ads for this device, and been drawn in by the promise that this device could grow a family’s worth of herbs, salad greens, and things you can stir fry, and more while only using two square feet of floor space, with just a few minutes here and there of work. I asked Bailes to research it (those online ads get me sometimes), and to only give it to me for Christmas if he also thought it was a good idea. On Christmas morning, a huge, heavy box sat under the tree.

I don’t relish setting things up, so it sat in the box for quite a while, to be honest, before I brought myself to take the pieces out and put them together. But finally, in late February, I got the thing assembled, put it in the kitchen, filled all the little slots with seedpods, and started up the cycle of scheduled lights and water. The user’s guide promised that I would see sprouts in about four days.

Two days later, the little seed pod labeled “mustard” had tiny little leaves beginning to unfurl. The moment that I saw those little leaves, I was astounded – not that the plant had sprouted early, I realized; I was surprised that it had sprouted at all. I had asked for, and received, what was supposed to be a fool-proof robotic garden. I know with my brain that if you give a seed water and light, it will sprout. Nevertheless, I realized as I saw those little leaves that I had somehow believed that the rules did not apply to me, to my seeds and my garden. I had been sure that something was going to go wrong not just with some of the plants but with every single one of

them, that these little pods with seeds in them would lie inert until I turned the automatic lights and water off and gave up.

This Lent, we've been exploring the faith journey of Peter, the leader among the disciples. Peter, who walked to Jesus on the water, who was the first to declare that Jesus was the Messiah, who went with Jesus to the mountaintop. Peter, who swore he would never deny Jesus, and then denied him three times before dawn, as Jesus had foretold. Peter, who heard Jesus speak of how he would suffer and die and rise again on the third day, and who rejected that teaching and berated Jesus for speaking in such a way. "God forbid it, Lord," he once said.

As Easter morning dawns, Peter is nowhere to be seen. In the Gospel according to Luke, he and the apostles have vanished from the narrative long before Jesus was crucified; it is the women who followed Jesus who have borne witness to the crucifixion. It is the women who have worked together with a rich man who knew Jesus who have seen to the details of burial. On Friday evening after Jesus' death, the sabbath began, and it would not have been considered proper to do burial rituals on the sabbath, so on the Saturday, the women would have rested. Sabbath ends when the stars appear in the evening sky, but that is not a safe time to go to a place of burial – I don't think any of us, even with our modern conveniences, would think it prudent to go to a cemetery in the middle of the night – and so they wait until the crack of dawn, and then make their way to the tomb.

As they arrive, they see that the stone has been rolled away, and the tomb is empty. Two men in dazzling clothes – presumably angels – appear to them. The women prostrate themselves, and the angels ask, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has been raised." And then they give the first commandment of the resurrection: remember. "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

The women go to the disciples to tell them what has happened – which should not come as a surprise, since it is exactly what Jesus had been trying to explain to them, many times and in many ways. But instead of rejoicing and celebrating, the disciples brush the story off. The narrator says, "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." The word translated as "idle tale" doesn't appear anywhere else in scripture, so translators have to make a decision about what they will put there. Commentator Karoline Lewis notes that the word

translated here as “an idle tale,” according to her research, actually means something more like “garbage.”

They shrug off the story that the women tell them... except for Peter. Jesus has told Peter what would happen, as he told them all. Unlike the other apostles, who shrug off the women’s account as hysteria or wishful thinking, Peter dares to hope. He hears what Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the rest of them have to say, and he has to see it for himself. He arises and runs all the way to the tomb.

The commentators of *A Sanctified Art* pose a question: does Peter run to the tomb because he believes? Or does he run to the tomb because he doubts? I wonder what he expected to see when he arrived there, and what he thought about along the way. Did he think he would meet the risen Christ? Did he think that he’d be wiser than the women, and find signs of grave robbers, or that they’d gone to the wrong place altogether? In my imagination, Peter is a bit like me with that garden – pessimistically certain that new life cannot and will not emerge, that what you see is what you get, that the mysteries that take place silent and unseen are not for people like him. He has less reason to believe in the resurrection than I have to believe that planted seeds will sprout – one is science, the basis of life, a reality behind every piece of bread any of us have ever eaten; the other would be a miracle. In my imagination, Peter does not believe in the resurrection, even as he races to the tomb on Easter morning. He goes there to prove to himself that the world is as he thought, that death is final, that the crushing violence of crucifixion is the last word in the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

We don’t know whether Peter ran to the tomb because he believed or because he doubted. But the story tells us that he ran. And so whether he believed or doubted, we know that he *hoped*. That he acted in hope even after all he had seen and all he had endured. That he longed to see the same Jesus he had denied.

In a way, it doesn’t matter whether Peter went to the tomb because he thought that Christ was risen, or whether he went because he thought that the women were talking nonsense. What matters is that he went to the tomb. He went to the tomb so that he could be surprised. He went to the tomb so he could see for himself. He went to the tomb because he dared to hope.

Even after that first little sprout grew in my garden contraption, I was pretty sure that it was just a fluke, a temporary thing. Every new sprout has been a surprise, and every day I go and check the garden and find once again that the seeds have grown more, and I find once again that it is a surprise to me, that I was sure that yesterday's growth would be the end of it. Every day I am shocked anew that they have grown again.

The seeds do not depend on my optimism, any more than resurrection depended on Peter's belief. The God who brings new life out of death does not require anything from us to make resurrection happen. Easter comes regardless – whether we believe, or whether we doubt; whether we come with optimism or pessimism. The question for us is this: how will we meet it? Will we rise early to seek the signs of resurrection? Will we shrug it all off as a cockamamie story, and stay home, smugly confident that we already know all there is to know? Or will we carry our doubts along with us, as we nevertheless dare to hope, and let hope propel us to the tomb to go and see for ourselves?

Friends, on this Easter morning, may you let foolish hope sprout, pushing you to search high and low for signs of new life. May hope push you out the door, so that you can see what God is doing. May we join with Peter, holding our skepticism in one hand and our yearning in the other, as our feet find their way to the garden, to see that God's way of love and new life is victorious. Amen.