

**Good Advice or Good News?
Luke 24:1-12, 36-49
Easter, March 27, 2016
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Imagine yourself sitting in your favorite coffee shop one morning. Perhaps you are reading the newspaper or perhaps it's your day to telecommute and you're on your laptop working. Suddenly, the door bursts open and in rushes a stranger with a wild, excited look on her face. "Good news!" she shouts. "You'll never guess! The greatest news you can imagine!"

What on earth can she be talking about? What could her good news be, and why does she think it justifies barging into a café to tell complete strangers about it?

Perhaps the doctors just told her they found a way to cure her son of the disease that was killing him. That would be great news indeed, at least for their immediate family and friends, but it doesn't really explain why she would announce it to strangers.

Perhaps this unusual event is occurring in Flint, Michigan and the woman has just learned that not only is the water safe to drink again, but an announcement has just been made about a corporation moving into the area that will put thousands of people back to work. There are some places in our country and around the world where that kind of hopeful news could cause someone to burst into a room and shout the news to everyone.

Perhaps this woman is the pastor of a diverse, dynamic, growing church in an urban neighborhood. Three days ago, on Maundy Thursday, she received an envelope and when she opened it, she read this brief letter.....tell story.....Friends, that shriek of delight and disbelief you heard Thursday was me—sharing the news with everyone around.

The Christian faith, in its earliest form, was presented as good news. That is the actual meaning of the word *gospel*. But, a lot of people are not sure anymore what makes the Christian message either good or news. The word "gospel" has become part of our common vernacular. We use it describe a particular genre of music. We talk of the "gospel truth" when we want to stress how reliable something is. We are so familiar with the words themselves that we've forgotten

to ask the question, what *is* the good news that Jesus himself announced and told his followers to announce as well?

To recover what we've missed, let's think again about the woman in the café. In each of the possible scenarios I described, the news isn't just something that happened out of the blue. Each one has a larger context, as if it were a new and unexpected development within a much larger story. In the first case, the news comes amid a family's struggle with a child's fatal illness. In the second, the announcement comes to a community in crisis. In the third, the news arrives in the midst of the ongoing needs of a growing family of faith. The news in question makes sense within each of the larger stories. Only by knowing the backstory can we understand why the announcement is such good news.

A second thing to note is that the news is about something that has happened, because of which things will now be different. This is news that is significant. It makes an impact and it changes lives. When you put good news within its larger story, it isn't just "Well, that was nice, but now we go back to the way things were before." The child is going to live! The whole region is going to recover! Some critical needs at the church can finally be fixed! Life has been transformed!

Third, the news introduces an intermediate period of waiting. The child is still in the hospital, but instead of waiting anxiously and sorrowfully at his bedside, his family now waits with excitement and joy. Thousands of people are still unemployed, but now they look forward to returning to work and providing for their loved ones. The money orders have been received, but the specific use still must be determined.

What good news regularly does, then, is to put a new event into an old story, to point us to a wonderful future that was previously thought to be out of reach, and in doing so, it introduces a new period in which, instead of living in hopelessness, people now wait with anticipation and excitement for what they know is on the way.

The Christian gospel is supposed to be exactly this sort of news. The gospel of Jesus Christ comes as news within a larger story. It points to a dramatically new and different future. And, it introduces a new period of waiting that changes our expectations.

The church needs to be constantly vigilant that we don't take the good news of Jesus and subtly change it into good advice, as in, here's how to live, here's how to pray, here are techniques for helping you become a better Christian, a better person, a better spouse, and in particular, here's how to make sure you're on the right path for what happens after death. Take this advice, say this prayer and this is how to be sure your ticket to heaven is punched so you don't end up in that other place. But, friends, that's good advice, not good news.

The whole point of advice is to get you to do something to achieve a desired result. There's certainly nothing wrong with good advice. We all need it from time to time. But, it is not the same thing as news.

Good news, not good advice, is what the women experienced that first Easter morning. On Friday, Joseph of Arimathea had asked for and received permission to take Jesus' crucified body from the cross. He wrapped the body in linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. Perhaps it was to have been Joseph's own place of burial when he died. A group of women followed Joseph and saw the tomb with Jesus' body laid inside it. The women then returned home to prepare a mixture of spices and ointments with which the dead were anointed. But first, they rested in observance of the Sabbath.

At early dawn on Sunday morning the women came back to the tomb carrying with them the spices for Jesus' body. But, instead of finding the tomb as they had left it Friday night, they arrived to discover that the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb had been rolled aside and the body was missing. As they stood there completely baffled by what they were seeing, suddenly two angels appeared, and the women responded as mortals always do at angelic visitations—they dropped to their knees in terror. And, then came the words that are perhaps my favorite words in all of scripture: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has been raised.”

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has been raised.” Now, friends, that's news. But, what kind of news is it? Let's think about how the women would have first heard this proclamation. Certainly it was a new and unexpected event in the context of a much larger story. Jesus himself had talked a great deal about that larger story. His very purpose for taking on human flesh, he said, was so that he could inaugurate God's kingdom, God's reign. Everything Jesus taught and everything he did pointed to what life is like when God is in charge. There is justice and peace for all people. Bodies and minds are healed because wholeness and health are the order of the day. Forgiveness and

mercy are asked for and granted so that relationships are restored. Disease, deprivation, war, suffering, grieving, death—none of it has a place in God’s kingdom. Instead, everything will be made new, including us, and the resurrection is a demonstration of God’s power to deliver on that promise.

We said the second characteristic of news is that it is something that has happened after which everything changes; nothing is the same, and certainly the women and the disciples are examples of that. In less than 24-hours, from Thursday’s Passover meal until the crucifixion on Friday, Jesus’ disciples, his closest friends, betrayed him, denied him and deserted him, running away in abject horror and fear—every last one of them. Yet after they see the risen Christ, they are transformed into prophets, preachers and priests who literally take the world by storm. The early church swelled by the tens of thousands as they put into practice Jesus’ ministry of healing, justice and reconciliation and preached with such boldness that they lost all concern for personal safety. They were willing to be beaten, flogged, jailed or killed, but nothing stopped them from telling the story of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Finally, the news that the women shared did introduce an intermediate time of waiting. God’s kingdom has come and it is coming. There will be a day when heaven and earth will be restored. That’s why we pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*” Contrary to a lot of the good advice that is touted from far too many a pulpit, we won’t be blowing this popsicle stand we call earth so that we can escape to a place called heaven. John the Evangelist is clear that the holy city, the new Jerusalem will descend with Christ when Christ returns to sit on his throne. The new heaven will come to join the new earth, reunited as they were at the beginning, and God’s kingdom will fully and finally be realized. Men and women, that is what we are waiting for.

In the meantime, while we wait we are the standard-bearers of God’s kingdom that is and is coming. We are to be so thoroughly dominated by the Good News of Christ that our lives continually tell the big story—the story that God loves the world so much that he was willing to absorb all our suffering, all our sin, all our brokenness and bear it to the cross where Christ willingly gave up his life so that we can live—not live someday in some distant heaven, but live now—live with joy, live with hope, live with contentment and peace, live victoriously regardless of our circumstances, live in communion with God in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who gives us the power to accomplish the hard work of justice and reconciliation. It is by the power of the Spirit that our suffering and

grief can be redeemed, good can emerge out of evil, and possibilities open in situations that look impossible.

Something *has* happened; something therefore *will* happen. And as a result, our lives right now are utterly and completely different. Friends, that is the good news of the gospel. Don't ever, ever settle for good advice, because Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah and to God be all glory and honor and praise. Amen.