

“An Idle Tale?”

“Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

That’s just wonderful! The leaders—the hand-picked, three-years-trained, called, and commissioned leaders of the Church— thought the message of the empty tomb was ***“an idle tale . . . and did not believe.”*** They were right there . . . on the scene . . . able to see for themselves . . . ***“and they did not believe.”*** Just great! So now you and I are supposed to do . . . what?

Let’s begin by looking at the term, ***“an idle tale.”*** It’s an odd use of language. We realize immediately that the word “tale” implies some piece of fiction, a story that is not to be believed. *“Old wive’s tales”* are those that have no basis in history or reality; a *“fish tale”* is a whopper of a lie, purporting to describe that *“one that got away.”* *“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no tales,”* runs one version of the old saying; often we hear it as *“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”* We understand they mean the same.

So, when the disciple receive the message from the women who had been to the tomb, they think it not credible. Now, so we’re clear this is not the same thing that we often hear as a teaser for the upcoming nightly news, *“President Biden was in town today, and you won’t believe what happened.”* Well, if you know I won’t believe it, why would I want to watch your stupid newscast? But we know what’s being said — not *“You won’t believe it,”* but *“This is really going to shock you, amaze you, delight you, thrill you, dismay you, horrify you . . . okay, it will make you think (and we know how you hate to do that).”* These disciples didn’t “pshaw” the women: *“Get outta here!”* They just plain did not believe them. It was to them “a tale” and a mighty tall tale, at that.

But what makes it ***“an idle tale”***?

As I pondered that question I decided to look at the Greek to see what the word for “idle” was. That word is ἀργός (hargos), which has a root meaning of “unprofitable.” It’s the word Jesus used in His parable about the talents, where the servant who buried his one coin was derided by his master as ἀργός. But that use of ἀργός is usually translated as “worthless.” Hmmm.

Okay . . . so did the disciples consider this story about men in white and an empty tomb a sign of laziness on the part of the women? If it were just a made-up story, it is a highly inventive one; certainly not a mark of laziness. Or was the story “unprofitable” because it didn’t get them anywhere, couldn’t help them make headway? Hard to see how it could not be the kind of story that could very well spark a great deal of interest in a fledgling little sect of Judaism . . . could be very profitable indeed.

Remember, the Jewish leaders were concerned about this very thing; they had gone to Pilate just after Jesus died to complain (what else?): “. . . *we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead,’ and the last deception would be worse than the first.*” (Matthew 27:63-64) But the disciples cannot see the possibilities that this “story,” this “tale” now offers them? They deem it “worthless”? A movie title comes to mind: “Dumb and Dumber.”

Consider my surprise, therefore, when I went to the Greek text of Luke searching for the phrase, “*an idle tale.*” Little did I realize that I would find no such a phrase in the Greek; apparently, there is no Greek word for “story” or “tale” — the closest I could find was μῦθος: “myth” (sometimes translated as “fable” but don’t get me started . . .). What I found here in Luke was not a phrase but a single noun: ληρος (layros).

Enough said . . . No? ληρος means “nonsense.” As far as I can tell this is the only time it it used in the New Testament. To me this just gets

“curiouser and curiouser” (to quote Alice). Why would Luke use a word that is so uncommonly used to describe the disciples’ reaction? Why would translators use such an odd phrase to translate such a straightforward concept? Let me deal with in order.

I think Luke used this word ληρος quite purposefully; and why he did not use the word ἀργός. First, that is often the case with what is called technically a “hapax legomenon” — a one-time use of a word. An odd, or infrequently used word or phrase, often catches the eye and the ear, driving home the point. Luke’s early listeners and readers might well have stopped in mid-sentence to ask something like, *“They thought it was what? ληρος? I thought that’s what you said.”*

Second, “nonsense” is a category quickly understood; “An idle tale,” is not. The disciples didn’t believe what the women told them because they thought it made no sense. By the way, it didn’t! What sense can be made of a message that tells you that a dead man is not longer dead and that the means by which that information came to light was from **“two men in dazzling clothes”**? What if someone came busting in here this morning crying, *“Elvis is alive!”* *“How do you know this?”* *“A very tall blue man with pointed ears told me.”* Right. We’d buy that in a New York minute. So let’s not be surprised by (or worse, judgmental toward) the apostles for their failure to believe. The account is incredible . . . it goes beyond belief.

But now, why do so many translated this as **“an idle tale”**? I cannot answer that; I had no part in the translation of the King James Version (I’m old, but not that old!); I was not invited onto the committees that translated the RSV and NRSV . . . so I cannot look into those collective minds to ascertain their reasons (or lack thereof). Maybe they were just being ληρος, and didn’t want to spend a bunch of time trying to figure out the best way to translate Luke’s one-time use of this Greek term, and, since the people who worked up the King James Version in 1611 came up with the phrase, “an idle tale” why not just keep it in there?

No, I cannot speak for them. But I can tell you what I fear it communicates to us. “An idle tale” is one that just sits there. It fails to capture anyone’s imagination. It doesn’t “grab” you.

We had friends back in New York who were an interesting couple in many ways. I had know Don and Barb since college (we all sang in the Tour Choir); Kristine came to know them when we became “neighbors” (okay we lived in towns about 20 miles apart; that’s close enough in upstate New York). Every time Don would start to tell a story, Barb would correct every detail. He’d say, “*We were coming out of the grocery store,*” and she would interrupt, “*No, Donald, it was the drug store.*” “*Oh, that’s right. Anyhow, there was this man standing by the corner . . .*” “*No, Donald, remember? There were two men.*” “*Oh yeah. At first there were two men.*” It did not take very long for everyone in the room to come to the conclusion that, no matter what happened, this was an idle tale. After two minutes of “*No, Donald,*” I didn’t care if he was reporting the discovery of a cure for cancer, or had held a three-day conversation with aliens from Neptune, or was about to describe the most exquisite sunset witnessed by man. For me, after the first “*No, Donald,*” I was done listening and it became an idle tale.

That’s what an idle tale is . . . it’s one that no one wants to hear because it doesn’t matter to them.

How can the women’s message be an idle tale to the apostles? Jesus had predicted this very thing three times: “***The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.***” [Mark 9:31] Okay, they hadn’t been paying close attention, right? No, Luke and Mark insist on telling us that they did not understand what Jesus meant and they were afraid to ask for clarification. So, it’s not like they were going to catch on right away to the message from the women: “*Oh, yeah! That’s what He was talking about!*” Uncomprehending when Jesus foretold it; uncomprehending when they hear it from the women . . . I’ll say this for the apostles: they were predictably consistent. So the tale from the women turned out to be an

idle tale, although it was anything but nonsense.

Except (I sort of feel like I'm in that moment in the Jurassic Park movie where they're turning off all the power to reboot the system, and we get clued in that there something there because a tiny light is flickering at the bottom of the computer screen, the teeniest flicker of hope in this time of threat), except Peter . . .except Peter what?

I don't want to make it seem like Peter was the champion of the group, and denounced his fellow apostles, "*Fellas! Fellas! These are good and virtuous women. They wouldn't lie to us. They wouldn't fabricate some fairy tale! Come on. Admittedly they are just women, so we can't take their testimony as true* (his culture, not my assessment), *but let's at least give them an attentive hearing. Go ahead, ladies, tell us more.*" Obviously, something was nagging at Peter; something was stirring.

Soooo . . . "***Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves. . .***" Now, Peter did not get a message; he did not get to see young men in dazzling apparel. What he got was just the slightest hint that maybe, just maybe, the women were speaking truth: An empty tomb. Linen cloths lying by themselves. That's it! But that was enough: "***. . . then he went home, amazed at what had happened.***"

We get even less . . . No angelic messengers, no empty tomb to stoop down and look into, no linen cloths lying alone . . . just the message: "***Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.***" Is it for you an idle tale?

All too quickly it can become one. Peter went home amazed. We will soon go home. What will be our state of mind? Tired, and dreading the work week ahead? Looking forward to a ball game? Hoping to get a little yard work in? Anxious to sit on the back deck with the Sunday paper? Fretting over dinner and the fifteen people who are coming at noon (or two, or four) to eat? Or just feeling "the same old same old"?

Will you go home amazed? Or will this tale of life, this account of death and resurrection, this narrative that everything has been changed and is new just sit there, like last week's cold pizza on your stomach, and cause little more than the spiritual equivalent of heartburn? This is no idle tale . . . but it can become one.

If no one else hears its, it just sits idly. It has great potential . . . but this story begs for kinesis; it has to be moving out, being told, shared, retold, lived out, acted, made alive in human hearts and minds. This story does not want to sit idling. This story asks to be spread abroad . . . to everyone.

Now, it can seem and remain to you an idle tale. And it will, if you just let it sit here in this building. I can't make you be amazed. But I can ask this of you: "*If you are not amazed today by this glorious message: **'He is not here, but has risen.'** If that does not thrill you, excite you, energize you, envelope you, will you at least pray this: 'Lord, help me to want to be amazed.'*" Do not be content to let this seem an idle tale, or worse, nonsense.

Holy Spirit. come. Fill us this moment and fill us with joy, with excitement, with power, and with promise because we now know: "***He is risen!***" and we are ready to make our lives, "*Alleluia!*"

Amen.