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4/21/19--University Presbyterian Church  
Luke 23:55-24:12

## THE STORY WE TELL

Some stories bear repeating. There are some stories we return to again and again. Maybe you have a favorite novel you've read so many times the cover is torn and the spine is cracked and the pages are beginning to fall out. But you love it and you keep going back to it. Or maybe there is a movie or television series that so captivates you, you've watched it over and over again. Young children often become attached to a particular bedtime story and torture their parents by requesting this book night after night. Our first child was like that. First he had us reading the *Big Book of Trucks* every night for months on end--a book which consisted of nothing but photos of dump trucks and diggers and backhoes and pavers. Not much of a plot there. So when he shifted to *Tumble Bumble* it was something of a relief. *Tumble Bumble* was a rhyming story about a small bug who meets up with different animal friends. It was cute the first 25 times. But after awhile it was kind of hard to sustain enthusiasm for the story. I recall one night when Tim and I fell into bed exhausted from the day's activities of caring for two small children. As we lay there in the dark, Tim spoke out: "A tiny bug went for a walk, he met a cat and stopped to talk." Then I jumped in with the next line. "They fell in step and strolled awhile, and bumped into a crocodile." Tim added the next sentence: "The crocodile grinned wide with glee, then introduced her friend the bee." Then it was my turn: "They all began to dance a jig, and bumped into a baby pig." And we continued on this way, in the dark, reciting from memory the entire story of *Tumble Bumble*.

Some stories are like that. You know them by heart. Today's Easter story is like that. We've gathered here this morning to hear a story we already know. But we've come to hear it

told again. We come to hear the story of the women's discovery of the empty tomb, to hear again the pronouncement that, "He is not here, but has risen."

I find it interesting that all four gospel accounts report that it was the women who were the first witnesses of the Resurrection. Women, who were second class citizens, were the first to learn about the Resurrection. And then, in every case, it is the women who share this news with the male disciples. In other words, the women deliver the first Easter sermon. And to all those churches who continue to perpetuate a ban on ordaining women because, they claim, Jesus chose only male disciples and so they are following biblical precedence, to such churches I would say that perhaps to be biblically faithful, only women should be allowed to preach on Easter Sunday. Because it was the women who proclaimed the first Easter sermon that Christ is risen.

I also take some comfort that should you find my sermon today underwhelming, that those women who preached the first Easter sermon also received a very skeptical and lackluster response. We are told in our reading today that the men found the women's story, "an idle tale." The male disciples thought such a story was utter nonsense! Why didn't they believe the women? Was it because it was women telling the story? I think there was more than sexism behind the men's disbelief. I think it was largely because the disciples, whether male or female, had become believers of another story. *Another* story had been rehearsed over and over again throughout their lives so many times they knew it by heart. It was a story they witnessed every day: of the powerful defeating the weak, of disabled and ill people begging on city streets, and of children going to bed hungry. It was the story of cruelty and suffering and poverty. It was the story of human failure and brokenness. It was the story of despair and hopelessness that life could ever be any different. It was the story of death. Loss and cruelty and injustice and human sin and death was the story they knew best. The male disciples were also keenly aware of how

their own personal failures had participated in this familiar story of darkness and defeat--of their personal betrayal and abandonment of Jesus.

We also know that story. It is the story that dominates the news. It is the story of the five-year old being tossed over the railing at a shopping mall and of college students falling to their deaths. It is the story of immigrant children separated from their parents and warehoused in cages. It is the story of wealthy parents cheating to ensure their children succeed. It is the story of the polar ice caps melting and of a global environmental crisis. It is the story of bombs and guns and mass shootings.

This story also plays out in our own lives as we lie awake in the dark, not reciting a children's story, but wrestling with the story of brokenness and anxiety--of how we will pay the bills, or regretting something we said or did, or worried about a loved one, or fearful about the future, or filled with despair over our lives.

*This* is the story Jesus' followers knew by heart. Whatever brief hopes they had for a different story died with Jesus. His death confirmed the story they knew all too well. And so of course, a story about a dead man rising from the grave was regarded as utter nonsense.

However, God offers a plot twist to this sorrowful but familiar story that dominates our lives. And this plot twist is found in our Easter story today in one small, simple, but profound word. The plot twist is found in the word "but." B-U-T. But. The word "but" disrupts the flow of the story and sends us off in a completely new direction, giving us a completely new story. And it happens multiple times in this short Easter story. This short passage is really a tug-of-war between the two competing stories that want to claim our hearts and minds and souls, and it all hinges on this little word "but." The Easter story begins with that word "but." After Jesus' body is laid in the tomb, the women leave in order to observe the Sabbath. And then the writer Luke

tells us, "*But* on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared." There is a shift in the story. Something new is happening in the plot. The women are expecting to find a dead body and have brought the spices and ointments needed to prepare the body for burial. They discover, however, that the stone is rolled away. Luke again states, "*but* when they went in, they did not find the body." A major plot twist. And then two men in dazzling clothes appear and ask the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, *but* has risen." Suddenly an entirely new story is offered to us. Suddenly death is not the last word. Life has gained the upper hand. The women return to tell the others all about this amazing, incredible shift in the story. And then we get another *but* that threatens the new story. The women tell the others, "*but* these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." We've got two competing stories pulling us in different directions. The old story of brokenness and defeat and suffering, or the new story of resurrection and life and hope and God's victory. *But*, we have one more "but." Luke tells us that despite feelings of disbelief, despite the pull of the old story of defeat and brokenness, "*But* Peter got up and ran to the tomb." Something in this new story the women told compelled him to check it out. And he what he saw there amazed him. Maybe he didn't fully understand what had taken place. Yet, we can begin to see the new story, the story of hope, the story of life, beginning to claim him. The Easter "but" becomes a sacred intrusion into the story of death and pain.

That is why we return here this morning to hear the story we already know. We come because we live in the world dominated by the old story and we need to hear the new story that begins with "But." Humans do horribly cruel things to one another, *but* sin is not the final defining quality in our lives. We have been raised to new life right now by the God of healing and transformation and love. There is terrible suffering in this world, *but* empowered by the

risen Christ, humans can extend great love and compassion. Divisions and alienation exists in families and between peoples and nations and races, *but*, the way of Christ lights a path toward reconciliation and forgiveness and wholeness. Loved ones will die, indeed we ourselves will die, *but*, the God of resurrection declares that the grave will not have the final word. There is a different story that takes the place of the old story. The risen Christ is at loose in the world and upends all our expectations about the old, old story.

This is not about some Polly-Anna kind of faith where we pretend that the darkness in the world or in our lives is really not so bad. Rather, this is about facing the darkness knowing that a different story is also a reality, a stronger reality, and that God's light will defeat the darkness. We tell this story over and over again so that whenever we find ourselves lying in the dark overcome by the old story's grip in our lives, or whenever the darkness of the world finds us, we will remember to recite the new story of God's resurrection power, of God's love, of God's healing, of God's forgiveness. And that story will transform us, comfort us, guide us, and shape us. We tell the story over and over again so that we will know it by heart and can then participate in telling this Easter story by how we live and care and forgive and serve and share.

I shared last week that the Rev. Elena Delgado, known to many of us here at UPC, experienced a brain hemorrhage nearly two weeks ago. Elena is a good friend and colleague and as she has no family in Buffalo, I also serve as her health care proxy. So when I got word that she was in the hospital, I hurried down to be with her. I parked my car and was crossing the street in the crosswalk to reach the hospital when I noticed a car making a turn into my path. It was broad daylight and I could clearly be seen, but the car kept approaching me. It wasn't traveling at a fast speed but rather was slowing advancing toward me, and just kept coming closer and closer, giving the impression that the driver was intentionally trying to hit me or force

me out of the crosswalk. When the car got very close and it appeared the driver wasn't going to stop, I cried out. The car stopped. I couldn't see the driver well because of the glare on the glass but I could see the driver gesticulating inside, making me think they were somehow mad at *me*. I was rattled and angry but in a hurry to get into the hospital and so I huffed off.

The next day I spent a long day with Elena at the hospital as she faced a battery of tests. During one of those times where she was getting a test, I headed down to the hospital cafeteria to get something to eat. I had finished my lunch and was getting up to clear my tray when an elderly man at a nearby table also got up and approached me. He said, "My name is Sam. My wife is in this hospital and yesterday as I was driving away, something got in my eyes and I couldn't see where I was driving. And I nearly hit you. I am so sorry. I was so shaken by how I nearly hit you that I just sat there for awhile. I am so sorry." And then he held out some money that he wanted me to take as an expression of his remorse. Well of course, I didn't want his money and after some wrangling over the issue I got him to put it away. I told him that his apology meant more to me than his money and how touched I was by his willingness to approach me--after all, I would never have recognized him. He didn't have to say anything to me. But he did. I shared the truth that all of us have experienced close calls like that. I asked about his wife, and we talked some about her health. And I told him my name and that I would pray for them. And we shook hands. And he went back to his very sick wife and I went back to my sick friend. And it felt like something significant had just happened, like an unusual and different story had just unfolded between us. Instead of the anger and grievances we succumb to each day, instead of the daily doses of road rage and the casual hostilities and divisions we give in to, Sam's initiative gave rise to a completely new story of grace and reconciliation and communion instead of division. It was an Easter "but," offering a new story to replace the old one we know all too

well. And that is what Easter gives all of us--a new story to live and to tell every day of our lives.