

Resurrection of Our Lord (RCL/C): "Incredible, But Not an Idle Tale!"
Luke 24:1-12
April 21, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Back in March one of our church friends asked me, "Did you hear about the man who was swallowed by the whale?" She could tell by the way I said, "No...." and the look on my face that I thought this was the lead-in to a joke. Then **she** said, "No, really, some guy was swallowed by a whale! I saw the video! It's just like the Jonah story!"

Sure enough. Rainer Schimpf is the name of a wildlife photographer who traveled to South Africa to report on the famous sardine run off that country's coast. He was in the water, in the middle of what's called a "bait ball" of sardines, small silvery fish surging all around him, with predators skulking on the edges. Before Schimpf knew it, he was enveloped in blackness and felt his head, shoulders, torso being compressed. He correctly guessed he was on the verge of being swallowed by a whale, a Bryde (BROO-dah) whale, to be precise. He said afterwards:

"I held my breath. I mean, there was no other thing I could do. I mean, you can't fight a 15 ton animal.... It worked out. He spit me out."¹

'Sounds like a fish tale, but seeing's believing, and many of you have probably seen the video! Here's a related fun fact: Schimpf's son is named Jonas – the German equivalent of Jonah!

In our Easter Gospel from St. Luke, we hear how the male disciples don't believe the women who return from the cemetery talking about how they found a tomb empty of anyone except a couple of dazzling heavenly beings who told them the Lord had been raised from the dead.

But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.
Luke 24:11

In other words: “Likely story!” “Nonsense!” The Gospels were originally written in Greek, and the word that’s translated “idle tale” is a medical term that describes the raving of a person who’s delirious from a high fever or who’s just plain crazy. The men thought the women had gone off their rocker to believe and say such a thing: that the One who was dead on Friday was alive on Sunday. Just as soon believe someone could be swallowed by a whale and live to tell the tale....

Words couldn’t describe the horror they’d felt, with their Master’s arrest and trial on Thursday night and early Friday, and the crucifixion the women had witnessed later that day and described to them afterwards. Maybe the closest we’ve come recently to seeing that depth of emotion is watching the stricken faces of Parisians as they watched flames rise from the roof of their beloved Notre Dame, and then saw its steeple collapse in a firestorm.

Knowing that Pastor Mark and I had just visited Notre Dame of Paris this past September, kind folks called, texted me, sent me news feeds of the fire in progress. I couldn’t bear seeing the real time images, until I heard that the stone vaulting had acted as a firebreak, a buffer from the heat, and that the rose windows, the towers, much of the sanctuary seemed to have been spared. I’d been feeling guilty that I felt physically ill seeing the cathedral in flames – my reaction made me realize I’ve become desensitized to images of human suffering I see reported every day.

One of the news stories quoted the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as saying, “We are a people of hope and of resurrection.” That describes all Christians of every denomination. We are, indeed, people of hope and of resurrection! Another news story told of people who approached the cathedral the day after the fire and collected ash in little bags. That’s a visual cameo that catapults us back to Ash Wednesday and forward to Easter: the phoenix rising from its ashes and the crucified Lord blazing forth in glorious resurrection.

A number of people interviewed, both French and American, spoke of Notre Dame as so very important to them. More than one person said they feel a “spiritual not religious” connection. But even though the French are largely unchurched these days, even though Notre Dame was renamed a “Temple of Reason” during the French Revolution and most of its bells were melted to make cannonballs, nothing can change the fact that people of faith raised that magnificent cathedral. It took about 200 years to build. Most of the people who participated in its construction knew they wouldn’t live to see it to completion. But that didn’t matter. They were doing their part for God. The living God.

One of the treasured relics saved from the fire is a crown of thorns given to the cathedral by King Louis IX about 800 years ago. The King believed it was the crown of thorns placed on our Lord’s head during His passion; carbon dating has determined that it is indeed about 2,000 years old. But I am sure that the first thing the cathedral staff removed from the building (after all the people were evacuated) was the reserved Eucharist: the presence of the risen Christ in, with and under the bread of Holy Communion. That glorious cathedral may be God’s house, just as this modest sanctuary is. But the Eucharist is God Himself. In the Supper we celebrate on this Day of the Resurrection and on every Lord’s Day, the risen Lord is present in, with and under bread and wine. This side of Heaven there is no way to be closer to Him than in this Holy Sacrament – no way to be closer to our loved ones who have gone ahead!

The women in today’s Gospel went to the tomb to perform one last loving act of service for their Master: to anoint His body and fold fragrant spices into His graveclothes. An empty tomb “**perplexed**” them, says St. Luke (24:4), but it wouldn’t have been enough to **convince** them of the resurrection. The presence of two men in dazzling clothes “terrified” them (24:5), but even their question, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” and their update, “He is not here, but

has risen,” wouldn’t have been enough to convince them that the One who had died was alive again and forevermore. To reach that faith conclusion, and to hold onto it lifelong, **the women had to experience the actual presence of the risen Lord.**

Some of those onlookers in Paris last Monday sang hymns as they watched the fire; song became their prayer that flames would not completely consume God’s house. We have experienced the presence of the risen Lord, too, as we’ve watched catastrophes unfold: for some of you, WW II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf Wars, the attacks of 9/11, Iraq and Afghanistan, Sandy’s floodwaters, the illness and death of loved ones and other very personal crises that never made the headlines but have become defining moments in our lives. We are here to sing our “Alleluias!” because we know that even though this news of our Lord’s resurrection **is incredible**, it is **not** “an **idle tale**”! The Crucified and Risen One who was raised by the Father raises us up daily from our little deaths; He who is the Word of Life pitches His tent among us; He who is the Bread of Life makes Himself known in the breaking of the Bread. The risen Lord is among us, too, in the last, the lost and the least, promising that when we care for them we care for Him.

Maybe you know what’s it’s like to be nearly “swallowed whole,” to see the things or the ones you love going up in flames, to barely survive a Good Friday and walk heavy-hearted to the tomb on Sunday morning. May you also know what it is to be spit out grateful on the shore, to gather ashes to commemorate an ending and to make a new beginning, to meet your risen Lord along the Way, each day, and in this Sacrament of Holy Communion today. Amen

¹Stephanie Pappas, “What a Fluke! Man Ends Up in Whale’s Mouth” (LiveScience on-line), March 12, 2019.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham