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Easter 1C
Peace, Seattle
March 27, 2016
Luke 24:1-11

FROM FEAR TO FAITH

FEAR is in the air these days, and in the aftermath of Brussels the pattern is all too familiar:
- helplessness in the face of evil;
- anxiety as the search begins for the living among the dead;
- candlelight vigils, testimonies of resilience; and vows to bring those responsible to justice.

In this election year FEAR has taken a seat front and center, as candidates pledge to do whatever it takes—no matter how unconscionable—to isolate the OTHER and so keep terror at bay.

More than once in recent days I've heard people I respect compare the rhetoric of this American election year to the rhetoric of 1930's Germany. Scary indeed.

The men and women who had journeyed with Jesus knew fear, too.

For many, after his arrest, fear took the driver's seat and they made themselves scarce or watched from a distance while his life ebbed out on the cross.

A few faithful women, Luke tells us, stuck it out, in spite of the fact that they saw their worst fears materialize.

They followed Joseph of Arimathea as he hastily dealt with Jesus' body before the Sabbath; they saw the **crypt** where he was laid so that, when Sabbath was over, they could come and complete his burial.

CRYPT—now there's an interesting word. It means, literally, "hidden place" and conjures up images of subterranean vaults where bodies lie buried.

Two years ago our family saw something fascinating—if a bit bizarre—in the crypt of Christchurch Cathedral in Dublin: The mummified remains of a cat and a rat encased in glass.

The sign told how the cat, presumably chasing the rat, became stuck with its prey in an organ pipe 150 years ago. As a result both were mummified.

The moral of the story? Those places we get stuck in life can become graves if we're not careful. Unable to process losses; unable to move forward or backward, we become locked in a perpetual struggle from which we cannot extricate ourselves.

It's the recurring story of the human race—as well as, that cat and that rat.

The fears that dominate us, raising questions about the future, and doubts about God's presence or even existence, all of these are present in the graveyard outside of Jerusalem.

But then something new, something unpredictable happens. His body is no longer there.

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In January two scientists from Cal Tech, Konstantin Batygin and Mike Brown, introduced the world to Planet Nine.[1]

This new addition to our solar system, they claim, is…
- 10 times the mass of Earth,
- 20 times further from the sun than Neptune,
- and stuck in an orbit 180 degrees different from all the other planets in our solar system.

Now, Batygin and Brown have not SEEN this hypothetical 9th Planet, mind you. Nobody has. But they are certain that the planet exists, because nothing else accounts for the way objects in the outer part of the solar system move. As one of them put it, IT MUST BE THERE! FOR NOTHING ELSE COULD EXERT SUCH INFLUENCE.[2]

The women who walk to the tomb in the predawn light think they know the facts.
Luke tells us they've seen it all: the crucifixion, the death, and the burial.

They know who they're looking for and where to find him. With spices and ointments in hand they go to do what they've done many times before—prepare a dead body for burial.

Luke grounds the whole story in tangible details. (Did you notice?)
There's the rock-hewn tomb, the linen cloth, the heavy stone, the fragrant spices.
We can easily imagine the place and the time---but then things fall of the map.
The story takes a turn 180 degrees different from everything we've ever known.

The stone's been rolled away; the tomb is empty.[3]

When the women leave the tomb to share what they've experienced with the rest of the community, their testimony (at least at first) is dismissed as an "idle tale" and no one believes them.

I get that. Trying to pencil out how the tomb of a clearly dead Jesus could be empty is harder than making the argument for the existence of a 9th planet! From the beginning there were plenty of skeptics who had a tough time wrapping their heads around that testimony.

We get a glimpse of those skeptics in between the lines of Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

Paul constructs his argument for the resurrection insisting that if Christ is not raised, then all is lost. In a time when people were suffering and dying for their faith, if Christ was not resurrected where was the hope? What was the point? [4]

"If for this life only we have hoped in Christ," Paul concludes, "we are of all people most to be pitied.'"

The resurrection of Jesus is not just a part of the story that we could, perhaps, leave out if it makes us too uncomfortable or raises too many questions.

His resurrection IS the story—the source and ground from which the whole proclamation flows, the center around which the church's mission revolves.

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[1] Read about the discovery at the Cal Tech website: https://www.caltech.edu/news/caltech-researchers-find-evidence-real-ninth-planet-49523 Shawnthea Monroe writes about it in the *Living by the Word* column in the March 16, 2016 edition of *Christian Century*. I am indebted to Pastor Monroe for the connection to Easter themes.
[2] *Christian Century*, op. cit.
[3] Ibid, with edits.
[4] Ibid.

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The reality is, in far too many places around the globe, Christians who have bound themselves to this testimony, HE IS NOT HERE, HE IS RISEN, are fighting for their very existence.

Christians are being martyred for their faith in northern Iraq, Pakistan, North Korea, Afghanistan, Sudan, Egypt, Nigeria, India, Malaysia, the list goes on.[5]

For these sisters and brothers, as for Paul and the first Christians living under the violent and unforgiving rule of Rome, "too much is at stake for the resurrection NOT to be true."

As Thomas Long writes, "A Christ whose resurrection occurs only in our minds has no right to call us to put our bodies on the line for justice."[6]

Sisters and brothers, no imagined resurrection can set us free from the fears that crouch so closely, so craftily; no metaphorical resurrection can get us unstuck from the pervasive struggles that come with the territory of being human—only a bodily one can.

> Make no mistake, writes Updike,
> if He rose at all, it was as His body...
> it was not as the flowers, each soft Spring recurrent;
> it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles;
> it was as His flesh: ours.
> Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
> making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages:
> let us walk through the door.[7]

"No one was with Jesus when he shrugged off the linen cloth and stepped out of the tomb. No one saw it happen. Just as no one has seen Planet Nine. But what else could exert such influence?"[8]

Only the resurrection could turn cowardly Peter into a powerful preacher, could transform the persecutor Saul into the missionary Paul.

Only the resurrection could turn ordinary women and men into saints and martyrs, preachers and prophets, activists and organizers[9] intent on building bridges rather than walls, and in the process rising from the margins to become a living, vibrant community, gathered around this Table with people of every tribe and race, tongue and nation.

We are here, dear friends, because the tale those brave women told when they left the graveyard behind them turned out to be true.

WHY DO YOU LOOK FOR LIVING AMONG DEAD? HE IS NOT HERE.
CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN, INDEED! AMEN.

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[5] http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/christians-the-worlds-most-persecuted-people-9630774.html
[6] Quoted in *Christian Century*, op. cit.
[7] John Updike, *"Seven Stanzas at Easter,"* from *Telephone Poles and Other Poems.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959. Published in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003, p. 261.
[8] *Christian Century*, op. cit.
[9] Ibid.