Easter Day / March 31, 2013 / Luke 24:1-12

Grace and peace to you on this Easter Day, in the name of Jesus, our Crucified and Risen Savior. Amen.

Some years ago, a friend of the preacher Thomas Long told Long a story about his young son. It seems the boy’s favorite TV shows were Mr. Rogers and Captain Kangaroo. (Now I said it was some years ago.) The little boy just loved them. One day, Mr. Rogers announced he was going to be a guest on Captain Kangaroo’s show the very next week. The young boy was beside himself. Each morning, he’d get up and ask his parents, “Is it today that Mr. Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?”

Finally, the great day came. The family assembled in front of the TV. And sure enough, Mister Rogers came to visit the Captain. But the boy watched only a minute, then got up and wandered from the room. His father was puzzled and followed him. “What is it, son? Is anything wrong?”

All the little boy could say was, “It’s too good. It’s just too good!”

I suppose even for you and me, it’s hard to know how to deal with something so wonderful. We’re used to bad news, after all: wars, terrorists, illnesses, grieving, job loss, government gridlock, and on and on. Cynicism is in the very air we breathe.

Maybe the news of the empty tomb, the news of the resurrection, the news of Jesus’ victory over death is just too good to believe.

Well, we’re in good company this morning; for the disciples of Jesus are having a hard time believing, too. They think the news that Jesus has risen from the dead is just an idle tale. It is so unexpected and so wonderful that it can’t possibly be true.

But listen, listen again to the story.

It starts on the first day of the week, a Sunday, just when the eastern horizon is blushing a pale pink. In the pristine silence of early morning, some women come to the tomb—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others. These women have been healed by Jesus—healed of evil spirits and other infirmities, as Luke tells us in chapter eight. If someone has restored your life, then it’s no wonder you will follow wherever he goes and believe whatever he says.

But Jesus the healer is dead now. So they come to the cemetery to bring spices to anoint the Lord’s body. On Friday, they’d watched him taken down from the cross and carried to a tomb in a nearby graveyard. The Lord’s body was wrapped in cloth and placed on a stone slab in a cavern carved out of the hillside rock. A large stone was rolled across the opening.

But what the women found at the cemetery on that Easter morning was not what they expected. In fact, it was a series of surprises. First, the tomb had been opened and the stone rolled away. Then, they found the body was gone, with only the cloth left behind. And if that weren’t enough, two men in dazzling clothes show up, angels no doubt. And these two ask, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Even in their terror, the women must have thought it a strange question. Jesus is dead, isn’t he? We saw it with our own eyes. Dead people don’t come back to life, do they? I mean, do they?

And the angels say, “He has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?”

And then these women apostles do remember. They remember that promise. And suddenly their despair turns to hope. And off they go to share the news. “Jesus is alive!” they tell Peter and John and James and all the rest. Oh, that’s crazy, these men think—though Peter does go to take a look, just in case. But for the disciples that Easter morning, the good news was just too good, I guess—too unexpected to be believed.

You see, the problem with God is that God keeps surprising us. The Lord keeps healing people who can’t be healed, loving people who can’t be loved, welcoming people who should not be welcomed, and calling people like us to follow him when you and I would just as soon go back to bed.

And you know what’s even more annoying? God’s love is relentless. God will not take no for an answer. In fact, Paul tells us that in Jesus it is not “yes and no” but always “Yes.” “For in Jesus,” says Paul, “every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’”

For us who are so cynical and despairing, or just too busy to bother, this is more than slightly aggravating. For we keep saying to God: Get real! Look around! Don’t you know how terrible things are? And God responds by shining hope upon us.

Let me tell you a story about God and death and life, about despair and hope. It’s one I’ve told before, but perhaps it will be new for some of you.

In May of 1999, my sister Lori was diagnosed with cancer. She died in December of that year. Here is what’s amazing about Lori’s last months. Even though Death was stalking her, it had no power over her. This shy and quiet woman was transformed. She no longer hid her light under a basket.

She reached out to her coworkers to tell them how much she appreciated them. She visited with family members, one by one, to tell them how much she loved them. And in early December, not long before she died, my sister said something truly astonishing—crazy, even. She said these last months were the best thing that ever happened to her. For fourteen years I’ve wondered what she meant. And this is what I think: In the midst of dying, she discovered life. Or to say it another way, in the midst of Good Friday, she saw Easter.

She taught her family that life and love are stronger than death, that the story of Jesus rising from the dead is true, that faith can change how you live your life. She was a witness—a witness to the power of the resurrection, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. And though Lori didn’t make it to Christmas, she’d already made it to Easter.

In your life, who are the witnesses to the power of the resurrection? They are here this morning, seated all around you. And there are others of this congregation who have joined the great cloud of heavenly witnesses and are here today in spirit: Marlys Johnson, Kathy Swedberg, Urlys Krueger, Jeanne Johns, Mary Gilsrud, Dallas Witte, David Otterness, Ron Green, Henry Thompson, Bob Peterson, Bob Esbjornson, Elder Jackson, Harry Aune, Bob Nelson, Jack Flinner, Lloyd Elton, and many, many others whose names live on in our hearts.

They point us to Easter on those days it seems like Lent. They point us to Easter on those days when we are so keenly aware of our sins and failures, when we are skeptical of good news and tiptoeing along the brink of despair.

It is not always Lent. In fact, our faith tells us that it is always Easter. With every sunrise, God shines hope upon us. Now you and I may keep saying to God, “It’s too good to be true!” But Easter is relentless. And there will come a morning when we will say, “Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”