

Puzzled and terrified

An Easter homily on Luke 24:1–12

David C. Cramer

“They stood there puzzled” (v. 4).¹

“The women were terrified” (v. 5).

“The story sounded like nonsense to the men, so they didn’t believe it” (v. 11).

“He went home again, wondering what had happened” (v. 12).

Puzzled. Terrified. Nonsense. Didn’t believe it. Wondering.

These are not words we normally associate with Easter. And yet, here they are in Luke’s Gospel narrative of that first Easter morning. Why would Luke include these details?

At the outset of his Gospel, Luke explains the purpose of his writing.

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write an accurate account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught. (1:1–4)

If Luke’s purpose is to help Theophilus and subsequent readers to “be certain of the truth of everything [they] were taught,” is not that purpose undermined by including these details of puzzlement, terror, unbelief, and seeming nonsense?

For many of us, even the idea of trying to be *certain* of the truth of everything we have been taught is troubling. The certainty we once had, or at least thought we had, has come crashing down as we have come to question some of the beliefs we were taught. Maybe it is particular beliefs

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about Scripture or creation or the end times or sexuality or atonement theory. Whatever it might be, after changes in our thinking about things we once held certain, it can start to feel like everything is up for grabs.

Or perhaps we have come to realize that some of the people who taught us the faith were less than trustworthy. People we looked up to as pillars of the faith ended up exploiting their power or abusing their spir-

itual authority, leaving us to question whether anything they taught us could be trusted. And so, again, we now lack that certainty we once felt about those teachings we received from them.

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The popular word right now for this crumbling of certitude is *deconstruction*. But perhaps for some of us a better way to describe it would be simply attempting to recover from religious trauma. It is not so much that we have set out intentionally to find the seams in our belief systems and to pull at them until

we have deconstructed everything. Rather, it is that our belief system has been rocked again and again by circumstances beyond our control.

For anyone feeling this way about faith, the good news from this story is that you are in good company. That is precisely how Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James felt that first Easter morning.

Less than forty-eight hours prior, they had looked on as the man they thought was their messiah was brutally executed by the state authorities, with the full approval of their religious authorities. All the male disciples had abandoned them and fled for their lives, leaving these women to accompany Jesus as he underwent the extreme bodily trauma that ultimately took his life as they looked on, helpless to stop it.

By accompanying Jesus in his trauma, these women experience intense trauma to their own psyches. (There's no such thing as *secondary* trauma; trauma is trauma.) So now, just days after this intense traumatic experience, as they go to lay spices and perfumes on Jesus's body, they have another startling experience. Jesus's body is gone, and two men in dazzling robes appear to them at the tomb.

It is no wonder that the women are puzzled and terrified. This is a perfectly natural and understandable response to what they are experiencing. Similarly, we should not be surprised that the male disciples initially

fail to understand or believe what the women are telling them. Sadly, this, too, is an all-too-common reaction to trauma survivors when they report what they have experienced.

Luke's inclusion of these details does not undermine the veracity of their account. If anything, it makes it more believable. And, ultimately, on Easter morning, that is all we are asked to do: to believe the testimony of trauma survivors about the things they have heard and seen and experienced.

We are not asked to submit ourselves to the teachings of religious authorities, despite our questions and doubts.

We are not asked to adopt a specific theological system or philosophical worldview.

We are not asked to adhere to an elaborate theory of the atonement.

We are simply asked to believe the testimony of trauma survivors.

But the good news of Easter goes even further than this. Ultimately, the truth of their testimony is not dependent on whether we believe it. One of the troubling aspects of the teaching I inherited is the notion that the victory Jesus accomplished over Sin and Death was somehow up

to me and my beliefs to access. If I did not say the right prayer or did not have the right belief system or did not have the appropriate level of certainty about that belief, Jesus's work would be null and void. Even though I was taught that I was saved by the work of Jesus, it still felt like there was a lot of pressure on me to get it right.

But the good news of Easter is that Jesus's victory over Sin and Death does not depend on how we feel about it on

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any given day. Jesus's victory is total, complete, and once-and-for-all. Indeed, it is because of Jesus's victory over Sin and Death that Paul can write that he is "convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love." He elaborates:

Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation

will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39)

It is the power of God's love that rose Jesus from the dead that first Easter morning. And it is that same power of God's love that assures us on Easter morning—and every morning—that we have nothing to fear. Sin and Death are defeated, and Jesus has claimed the victory.

He is risen.

He is risen, indeed.

About the author

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