

By The Light Of A Rumour

A sermon on Luke 24:1-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 20 April 2019

© LaughingBird.net

Message

We have been drawn into an unstoppable rumour that keeps interrupting the dominant story of fear, hostility and death.

Sermon

On the first day of the week, at early dawn,
they came to the tomb
taking the embalming spices they had prepared.

Been there, done that?
The tragedy has passed
The dust has begun to settle
The embers have been doused
And we tiptoe out
and wonder what to do now.

Tragedies come and tragedies go
but we are still never really prepared for the next one.
Every disastrous death,
every horrendous tragedy,
every large-scale or even small-scale trauma,
they all feel somehow unique when they hit
All over again
we don't know what to do
how to act

There are some expected rituals.
They came to the tomb
taking the spices they had prepared.
But every time
we are not sure if they feel right, feel appropriate
Every time we wonder if they show enough respect
or whether they have become passé

Do we sing Ave Maria in the streets
while the Cathedral burns?
Do we drop flowers at the mosque in Flemington
when the carnage happened in Christchurch?
Do we gather in the park where she was killed
and light candles
and voice our anger over the violence?
Do we defiantly pledge to rebuild
even before we know what has really been destroyed?
Do we tiptoe out to the tomb
with the spices we have prepared?

The need to do something, something right,
is so powerful
If we can just get it right
just respond appropriately
perhaps we can contain the chaos
perhaps we can hold the monsters at bay
perhaps we can still believe there's a future
perhaps we can find a way to survive
to go on
to live with some semblance of meaning
of hope
of purpose

The forces that rage against that are so huge
They constantly threaten to overwhelm us
Climate catastrophe
The refugee crisis
Hate crimes and terrorism
Systemic abuse of vulnerable people
in care facilities, psych wards, churches
The politics of polarisation
driving us into factions of suspicion and hostility
An epidemic of depression and suicide
A world sliding into apocalypse
An ancient cathedral in flames

Whenever our hearts leap
at a message of love and hope
of peace
of healing and unity
the crushing boot of deadly reality
comes crashing down again
and all our hope and love and peace and healing
end up humiliated
nailed to a post
hung up for all to see
a macabre spectacle
a chilling display of horror
to terrify us back into our boxes
into our timid compliance
into imagining nothing more
than tiptoeing out to the tomb
with the spices we have prepared

The empire always wins in the end
The shadow of death conquers all
The empire tolerates our little coping rituals
taking our spices to the tomb

lighting our candles in the park
placing our flowers at the gate of the mosque
even the occasional street march
The empire tolerates them
because it understands
It understands our need for coping strategies
for tokens of normality surviving
It understands that they don't threaten its power
The empire always wins in the end

Could there be another story?
Is there a message that can come galloping over the hill
and rescue us all from the apocalypse?
Deep in our bones
we hunger for that
for an all-conquering messiah
who will trample down
all that threatens us and terrorises us.
Deep in our bones
we long for a dramatic change of story

And that hunger brings us here tonight
searching for a new story
for something big and new and powerful
something that will do so much more
than bring spices and lay flowers

But most of us have been here before
We've gathered around the fire
and listened to the ancient stories
and sung the hymns
and plunged into the water
But we're hungering still
Global salvation has not come galloping over the hill
Tragedies continue to come and go
and the slide into apocalypse has not slowed
The empires still holds the upper hand
Flowers and spices still don't seem enough

Do I just need to believe harder?
Do I just need to preach more strongly?
Do I bang the pulpit
and shout that death has been utterly destroyed?
That the kingdom has come?
That death and pain and crying are no more?

I could
but who would believe me?
There are too many people here

who have lost loved ones
some even in the past year
There are too many people here
who have been crippled by abuse
or betrayal
or sickness
or systemic injustice
The gospel needs to be good news to them
It needs to make sense of their experience
not deny it or ignore it
or erase it from memory

But the truth is
that we are not gathered here
because it is all better now
We are not gathered here
because there is nothing to worry about anymore
We are not gathered here
because it immunises us
against pain and sorrow and fear

We are gathered here because we have heard a rumour
We are gathered here
because the usual story has been interrupted
Not altogether overthrown
but scrambled and confused
There's a crack in the darkness
and a little light's breaking through

Some women found the stone rolled away
the tomb opened
They saw someone who told them something incredible
impossible
that a dead man had been raised
that Jesus was alive
despite being dead
They ran back to their friends
and told what they had seen and heard
But no one believed them
The first century patriarchy
was not going to be taken in
by the idle tales of women
Their words seemed too ridiculous

Jesus is dead
We saw it ourselves
Whenever you get too hopeful about anything
it crumbles to dust
The empire always wins in the end

But the rumour wouldn't go away
Little flashes of light kept getting through that crack
Simon Peter got up and ran to see for himself
The body was gone, sure enough,
and the tomb was open,
but what to make of it?
He was amazed
but unsure what to make of it.

That's as far as our reading of the story went tonight
No grand appearance
of a triumphant conqueror of death
But the rumours didn't stop there
Soon a couple bobbed up
who reckoned they'd seen him on the road
recognised him when he sat down to eat with them
but then he'd promptly vanished from sight
More idle tales?
Or a little more light breaking through?

The rumours kept growing
Luke the gospel writer had to write another whole book
the Acts of the Apostles
to contain the rumours, the strange stories
the jagged shafts of light
that kept illuminating question marks
over the standard old story
Is it really all there is?

And most of us are here tonight
because we haven't just heard those rumours
but we've become part of them
Just like those first witnesses
our experiences have been unclear
ambiguous
confusing
but beckoning, inviting, intriguing

Put all the rumours before a special investigator
and the report would surely conclude
that there is no chance of persuading a jury
Too much confusion
Too little clarity or consistency
But when we get caught up in the stories ourselves
and the light begins breaking through
we no longer much care
what a jury would make of it

We're not often 100% sure
that we are fully persuaded ourselves
It still doesn't entirely make sense
It still leaves us confused
But when you've seen the light break through
you can't forget it
even if you can't explain it

Fear and death seem to march on unchecked
But then weird things keep happening
More cracks appear
Little spot fires of love and mercy keep breaking out

A hate-fuelled gunman tries to ignite a war on Islam
But a crack appears in the midst of the horror
and instead of inflaming animosity towards Muslims
he accidentally inspires tens of thousands of people
to put their arms around their Muslim neighbours
and take flowers to the mosques
and suddenly the usual script has gone awry
and shafts of light have ignited spot fires
of love and neighbourliness and compassion

The billionaires put up millions to rebuild Notre Dame
and suddenly a shaft of light breaks through
in South Louisiana
Ordinary people say "Why not us?"
and a few bucks at a time
they suddenly [raise two million dollars](#)
to rebuild three local black Baptist churches
torched by arsonists in recent weeks

The rumour circulates again and again
that death has lost control of its own narrative
that hatred is having more and more trouble
papering over the cracks to hold out the light

Someone has broken free
Someone has cracked open the impenetrable wall
Someone has shown that the empire had no clothes
that death is not nearly as toxic as it made out
that fear and hatred and hostility
contagious though they might be
cannot get a grip
on those who have been infected
by the rumour of love and life

So we are here tonight,
not because everything is okay now

not because death and pain and trauma are no more
and not because the apocalypse has been averted

We are here
because the one who we saw crucified
has cracked open the darkness
and scrambled the story
and reached out to us with wounded hands
confusing us even more
but sparking spot fires of love and hope
and illuminating glimpses
of a pathway to freedom

We are here tonight,
not because we have the hottest show
and can pull out all the bells and whistles
and whip ourselves into frenzy of spiritual certainty

We are here
because here the rumour is a little louder
here the crack is a little wider
and the light just a little clearer

We are here because many of the rumours
that have our own names attached
have happened here
We've heard an old story
and it has broken us open
We've broken bread
and it has been balm to our wounds
We've caught half a glimpse of a crucified man
reaching out with wounded hands
to gather us in unity
around this, his table

We've learned that we can't hold onto him here
Whenever we've tried
he's slipped through our fingers
and only reappeared when we've gone outside
and glimpsed him again
among the strangers, the broken, the vulnerable

So here we are
drawn by the light of a rumour
setting our feet on a pathway of freedom
a pathway that can't avoid death and pain and fear
but can and does avoid being defined by them
defeated by them
being captive to them

becoming contributors to them
because we have become captive to the rumour
the rumour that Jesus lives
the rumour that has set our hearts alight
with love and mercy and hope
the rumour that is reflected here in this pool
and tasted here at this table
and breathed here in these people.