

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 24:1-12

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

Luke's story of the discovery of the empty tomb by the women is a rich and dynamic story. The character of the sounds is relatively easy to identify.

The first episode is a description of the stone being rolled away from the perspective of the women. It is to be told with their emotions. Their feelings are on the one hand perplexity, as named in the story, but also fear of the unknown and terror in response to the appearance of the two men. The angel's words are calm. Their announcement of the resurrection is joyful. The concluding focus of their announcement is to invite the women, and, therefore, the audience to remember Jesus' words.

The next part of the story, returning from the tomb, is also told from the perspective of the women. It communicates their excitement as they told the apostles what had happened. The description of the disbelief of the apostles is from the point of view of the narrator and is a big letdown. Peter's running is told with the energy of his going to find out what had happened and then being perplexed at the end of the story. These moves in the story are the points of major change in the dynamics of its telling.

Now let's listen to the story with more attention to its details. The two episodes that establish the setting for the resurrection announcement begin with the setting in time and place: "first day of the week, early dawn, they came to the tomb" Then we are told the action of the women and the "problem" in the plot: "they came to the tomb, they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they didn't find the body." That's the climax of the first episode.

The second episode is the description of the two men in dazzling clothes, and the response of the women. They respond in terror and bow their faces to the ground.

The announcement of the resurrection by the men in dazzling clothes follows. "Why you looking for the living among the dead? He's not here but has risen." These two lines are structured as a rhetorical question and answer: Why do you look?/Not here but risen. The response to the women's terror is implicit in the tone of the angels. It is a calm, slightly amused, light tone, without any note of critique.

The fourth episode is about remembering. The angels say, "Remember how he told you..." and then basically summarize the passion prophecy, "the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, crucified, and on the third day rise again." And indeed, the women do remember. The key mnemonic hook here is to remember. All of this is told in a tone of good cheer.

The next episode is about the women's return from the tomb. They told what had happened to the eleven. The list of the women—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women—is a distinctive Lucan list. Focus on those names. Each name is a description of one of the woman who was excited, thrilled, and ecstatic about this announcement. Their names can be spoken in that tone rather than the more robotic listing of names.

The last episode tells about the disciples' response: skepticism by the thirteen and checking out their story by Peter. The motif of male skepticism of women's stories is introduced here. It is reiterated in the Emmaus appearance story (Luke 24:22-23), as is the note of skepticism about the resurrection, and in the Jerusalem appearance (Luke 24:36-41).

This is a relatively easy story to learn as long as you identify the mnemonic structures that are built into the story. The story begins in the darkness: "On the first day of the week at early dawn they came to the tomb taking the spices that they had prepared." That's a basic clue about how to begin—with a whisper, conveying the atmosphere of early morning.

The spices had been prepared on Friday before sundown in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death and burial. Joseph put him in the tomb quickly because it was near sundown. Then the women went back and prepared the spices. They rested on the Sabbath, which began Friday evening at sunset and lasted until Saturday at sunset. They went out early on Sunday morning to the tomb carrying the spices that they had prepared on Friday evening.

This part of the story has an atmosphere of grief and mourning. The story creates a high degree of identification with the women and of sympathy with their grief. The stone rolled away from the tomb is described from the women's point of view, that is, with their emotions. Thus, the sentence—"They found the stone rolled away from the tomb but when they went in and did not find the body"—is not said from an objective point of view, but from the perspective of the grieving women.

The same is true for their going into the tomb and not finding Jesus' body. "As they were talking about it and were puzzled about this" is the description of their emotion. They didn't know what had happened. They are confused, and suddenly two men appear who are described by their clothing: "Two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them." The dazzling clothes means they are divine messengers.

The messengers are signs of the presence of God. Their announcement of the resurrection is a reversal of all expectations. It is an announcement of the victory of God over the power of evil, and it is a vindication of Jesus' way of nonviolence. This is a new revelation of how God will save Israel and the world.

The question that the messengers ask the women is a question of comfort that addresses their terror: "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He isn't here but he has risen." It is a response to their terror at seeing them that is intended to help them relax. In telling the story you first of all have to create the terror in order for there to be something for the angels to respond to.

The focus of the angels' announcement is on remembering: "Remember what he had foretold?" And then they remembered. Thus, the experience of the resurrection is for us as listeners an invitation to remember with the women. Luke's listeners are invited to remember all that has gone before. It is implicit that they should remember Jesus' passion prophecies, but it is also encouragement to remember all of Jesus' words. The women and the audience are invited to go to the place of memory. The women remembered his words. This is told from the perspective of the women's interior experience: "They remembered his words."

Then they returned from the tomb and "told all this to the eleven and to all the rest!" There is excitement, energy, hope, and promise in their announcement. They are like kids running home to tell about a great thing that they had just seen. Listing their names should have that same spirit. "Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women who were with them!" This is not a list of witnesses; this is rather the naming of the women who were ecstatic at what had been told them and what they have discovered.

The summary witness is repeated, and this time we learn the response of the apostles: "They told this to the apostles, but these words seemed to them like an idle tale and they didn't believe them." This is a typical male response to women's stories, it's the "chick flick" syndrome. Implicit in the term "idle tale" is the derogatory notion of the "tales of women."

The audience hears this from the point of view of the women, so it's a major disappointment. All the air is gone out of the balloon. It is a big letdown in relation to be women's announcement. Nevertheless, "Peter got up and ran to the tomb, he stooped, looked in and saw the linen cloths and then went home, wondering what had happened." I have translated this as "wondering what had happened" because it is not clear what it means that Peter saw the clothes and it is not clear that he believes the women. The NRSV translation—"amazed at what had happened"—implies that Peter believed that Jesus was raised. If he had, he would have gone and told the other disciples rather than going home. The implication is that he verified the women's report of the empty tomb but did not yet believe that Jesus had been raised to life.

One of the things that is of particular interest about this story is that, as with the story of the appearance on the road to Emmaus, it is a story about men telling stories about dumb things they have done. This is a story about being fools, in this case, for not believing the women. Everybody that hears the story knows the traditions of women's stories, but

clearly in this case, the women were completely right and the problem was that the apostles wouldn't believe them.

This dynamic of men telling stories about other men being fools is both delightful and, in the patriarchal society of the ancient world, surprising. Jesus names them as fools in his response to the two on the road to Emmaus: "You fools, don't you believe all these things have been told to you?" This also establishes the women as witnesses who should be respected and paid attention to. A major question that is unresolved at the end of this story is whether or not the women will be vindicated. They are vindicated when Jesus appears to the two on the road to Emmaus, and then to the eleven plus two in Jerusalem.

This is a story of joy, of the reversal of expectations in the news of the resurrection, and a second reversal of expectations of male expectations in the apostles' response to the women's news. What the story does is to create excitement. It depicts the experience of men and women not believing what has been told to them. This clearly was an experience that was present for many of those who told this story. First they had not believed the story, and then when they told it to others, people didn't believe them. This is then describing a common experience for the audiences of Luke's tale, and of apostles then and now.