

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## **“An Idle Tale”**

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*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but 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.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*

*Luke 24:1-12*

*If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.*

*Romans 8:11*

[Read passages.] Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

The women who had come to the tomb early that morning didn't take long to realize that what had happened was a pretty big deal. These were the same women who had stayed with him at the cross, no matter how painful it was to watch him suffer, who had followed Joseph of Arimathea when he took Jesus's body down from the cross, wrapped him in linen, and laid him in the tomb, who had seen the tomb and how his body was put there and had gone back to prepare spices for his body. They saw him die; they watched where his body was put; maybe they even watched the stone being rolled across the entrance to the tomb. That was two days earlier. And so when the women who had come to the tomb early that morning to find the stone rolled away, it didn't take them long to realize that what had happened was a pretty big deal. The trouble was not many others felt the same way.

You see after the women came to that tomb, after they saw the stone rolled away, after they saw Jesus's body was gone, after the two men in dazzling white told them he had risen from the dead, the women had gone back to the rest of the disciples. They shared what had happened, only to be doubted, only to be thought that their account was, as Luke puts it, “an idle tale.”

“An idle tale” is actually kind of a polite way of putting it. What's probably a better term there would be “nonsense,” or “a pipe dream,” or “a story so ridiculous it was laughable.” That word there for “an idle tale” is the same word we get the word “delirious” from, suggesting the rest of the disciples thought they were out of their minds, delirious with grief. There might've been prejudice at work here; they might've been suspicious of

some kind of trap; but one way or another, they just couldn't believe that something as monumental as the death of their Teacher, their Lord, the one they had thought to be their Messiah, could simply be reversed, or resolved, or restored. And I half suspect that even though no one there thought anything was funny, I wonder if a few of them gave one of those stunned chuckles you give, when to your mind there's just nothing else to say.

In some ways, it's kind of hard to blame them. You hear a story so outlandish, so nonsensical, even laughable, it's kind of hard not to chuckle at it. I had one of those responses about two weeks ago, a story that seems so outlandish it's almost funny. Almost two weeks ago, on the other side of the world, it seemed that a ship had run aground. That in and of itself isn't all that remarkable. But it was the where and what kind of ship that made it a bit different.

I'm guessing many of you may have seen the headlines about all this, but a ship called the *Ever Given* was passing through the Suez Canal in Egypt, got caught in a sandstorm, and as a result of the high winds and low visibility, ran aground on the side of the canal in such a way that both its bow and its stern were wedged on either side of the canal, completely blocking its passage.

If on the chance you haven't seen any pictures of this, let me give this some scale behind this. The *Ever Given* is one of the largest ships in the world. It's almost 200 feet wide, that's two basketball courts. It's as tall as an eight-story building. If you stood the length of it upright, it'd stretch higher than the Eiffel Tower or the Empire State Building. It's pretty impressive. Can carry twenty thousand of those shipping containers. A literal engine of global trade. A marvel of modern engineering and seafaring. And it got stuck.

And I thought it was kind of funny. I saw the pictures. The pictures from the town that was nearby, with this enormous ship in the distance towering over this small town, or from a satellite, an open waterway in the canal except for this ship wedged diagonally across it. Or that picture, and this was my favorite one, of the bow of the ship, dug into the side of the canal, with an excavator—one of those big excavators we see at construction sites—to the side of it trying to dig out the sand and dirt, but even this huge excavator looked more like Thomas the Tank Engine in comparison to this ship. Yeah, I thought it was kind of funny.

Because how else could you respond? This is a ship that can carry almost 200,000 tons, 400,000,000 pounds, and it runs aground. It's stuck. You may have seen the Internet memes using that same picture of the enormous ship embedded in the dirt, with the tiny excavator (not actually tiny, but in comparison) trying to dig it out. It became this rallying cry for futile efforts, to the point of amusement. As in, a caption next to the ship saying, "The crushing weight of anxiety and expectations," with the tiny little excavator saying, "Me, making a to-do list." To think that you could just scoot this thing back into the water is kind of laughable. So, I thought it was kind of funny.

That's what the disciples thought about this story of Jesus rising from the dead, of the tomb being empty, of the stone being rolled away. It was kind of laughable, nonsense, an idle tale. The stone covering the entrance to that tomb might as well have been the ship in the Suez Canal, not in the sense that you couldn't move it—people could move the stone after all—but in the sense of, Jesus was dead. Trying to make him not dead was about as useful as that tiny little excavator digging out the enormous ship. The Romans had killed him, and they were very good at killing people that they wanted to kill. It's not like there are varying degrees of being dead, but if there were, being killed by the Romans would have definitely ranked up there. To the disciples, coming back to life after dying on a cross made about as much sense as trying to just scoot the *Ever Given* back into the water. It's done. It's stuck. This is how things are now.

What's left to do but laugh a little? What's left to do but shrug it off?

Maybe that's what we do on Easter sometimes. Shrug it off. Not necessarily because we think it's funny, but maybe because it just doesn't mean that much. Maybe it used to. Maybe it used to mean a lot to you, or maybe it never meant much to you at all, or maybe we know what Easter should mean, but in practice the most that Easter means to you is a nice Spring morning followed by a good brunch with family and friends. If that's what it means, it's kind of easy to shrug it off.

That's what I did, when I heard about this ship. Shrugged it off. That is, until the news started coming in about how big a deal it was that this ship was stuck in the Suez Canal. I developed a mild fascination with global trade and supply chains over the past two weeks. The whole combination of planes, trains, trucks, and ships, all for the sake of getting stuff from Point A to Point B. Because so much of what we see as things on the shelves in stores depends upon this system of planes and trains and trucks and ships working smoothly. And most of the time, it does. It's incentivized to work smoothly; it's incentivized to find the most efficient way move things and maximize it; and that all works great, until of course it doesn't.

The number that had gotten thrown around was that 10% of all global trade passed through the Suez Canal, which was now shut off. You might think 10%, oh that's not so bad, but when you think about it, 10% of all the things that get shipped anywhere, you realize, that's gigantic. And then you realize, all of that traffic now has to find some other way around, because the canal is blocked. Did any of you see the graphic of all the ships that had to back up because the canal was blocked up? Hundreds of ships containing thousands upon thousands of shipping containers had to either sit idly, find a way to unload its cargo to be moved over land, or take the long trip around Africa. Every day the canal was blocked, it was estimated that \$10 billion worth of trade was held up. Suddenly it's not so funny. Suddenly it's not so easy to shrug it off.

And I wonder if it'd be so easy to shrug off Easter as an "idle tale" if, like the hundreds of backed up ships, we recognized just what was at stake. Because if that stone had stayed there at the entrance to the tomb, it would mean that everything Jesus had taught, everything that Jesus had done, everything that Jesus said would happen, everything that Jesus told us about who he was, why he had come, what he was doing, all of it wasn't true. Part and parcel with that is that everything that had happened two days earlier, everything that had happened at the cross, every bit of sinfulness Jesus took upon himself, every bit of cruelty and evil that the world could dish out, every bit of oppression, every power of empire, all of it stood victorious with every second that stone stayed there at the entrance of the tomb. No redemption, no hope, no good news.

When you put it that way, not so easy to shrug it off now. Because no matter what the disciples could have done, nothing they could do could reverse the victory that sin and death seemed to hold that morning.

In all the efforts to free the *Ever Given*, an enormous fleet of tugboats, in addition to those tiny little excavators, mobilized to try to push and pull the ship free, but not with much success. There was one tugboat called the *Baraka*, apparently one of the largest and most powerful in the canal, and on it was a crewman named Ebrahim. When the *Baraka* arrived, Ebrahim saw the size and scope of just what had happened, and asked, "Will this ship *ever* be freed?"

To all reasonable people, Jesus lying in the tomb was just as hopeless. It was the sad but predictable end to his story, and now this is how it is. He was dead, and to all appearances all the forces of evil and sin and death basked in victory, and there was nothing, no matter how powerful or devout any of his followers may have been, nothing that anyone could do to get him out of it.

As you may already know, or as you may have guessed, the *Ever Given* is no longer stuck in the Suez Canal. But it wasn't some engineering feat or clever seafaring that made it free. Sure, the tugboats and the

excavators did their part I guess, but you know what really got the ship free? The tide came in. A seasonally high tide came about a week ago, and it was enough for the ship to float again and to eventually float free of the embankment. All the efforts humanity could bring to bear, and it was the rising tide that did the trick.

When the women came to the tomb that morning, they found the tomb empty, not because someone had robbed the grave, not because someone had wedged the stone free, but because something else had happened, something like a rising tide, something beyond our doing, something beyond even our ability to comprehend. The Spirit of God in all of his power said to all those voices of sin and darkness and death that up to that point had been gloating over their victory, he said, “Your time is over, and a new world is beginning. A world in which a kingdom of life, of forgiveness, of grace, of joy in the Lord is at hand, and the world that you tried to corrupt in malice has been given new hope. For Christ is alive.”

That’s the message the women carried back to the disciples. The disciples were skeptical at first, thought it was an idle tale. And maybe you might too. But friends, if you find yourselves today wondering if those same forces of sin and death that stood gloating on Easter morning still hold sway, if you feel those same things backed up within your own life, if you feel like you are held captive and, like a gigantic ship embedded in the side of a canal, there is nothing that anyone could do to get you out, know this: that not even the grip of death could hold our Lord, and the same Spirit that raised him from the dead, the same force that brought about this impossible new hope, the risen Christ, that rising tide, could be at work in you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.