

Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 24:1-12

### Learning a New Word

When you acquire a foreign tongue, when you begin to communicate in and with terms that initially is not your own, when you learn a new language, you know what some of the first words you learn are, right?

“Hello.” “Hello my name is...” Those could be some of the first words that you learn, especially if you are learning the new language in a classroom. Your first new words might be: “Hello, my name is...” Or, if you are learning it from a guide book for travelers, then maybe some of the first words are: “Thank you,” or “Please.” “Please, bathroom?” These are all useful words, and they are probably some of the first words you’ll learn in a controlled environment for a discrete venture.

But if you learn a new language among people who know that language, people who can describe life’s challenges and achievements in that language... Every language, of course, is expressive, vivid, colorful. When you learn a language from people who work and play in it, the new words you learn may not be “hello,” “thank you,” or “please.” These words might not direct you to a bathroom, but they might tell you what goes in the toilet.

We have a word like that in the Easter gospel according to the evangelist Luke. It’s a word in the language in which the New Testament was originally written, a conversational form of ancient Greek, very much a vernacular language. The word is “*leiros*.” You should all be blushing, astonished and aghast that I said that from the pulpit. “*Leiros*.” Really, someone should be bleeping me out right now. Maybe the organist could hit a key every time I say it, “*leiros*.”

As noted by the preacher Anna Carter Florence, to whom this insight is indebted, the word *leiros* occurs when and where it does, with intention, for impact. It has a singular role, a spectacularly singular role, seeing as it is used only once, in the entire New Testament. This word occurs only once! In the entire New Testament! And where? Here: in the gospel reading today, in Luke’s account of the resurrection. After Friday more horrible than any ever before, after days of grief and fear, of hope dashed, of hope dismantled, of hope destroyed so completely it outpaces imagining... It didn’t seem possible that they could feel that low, until they did. They watched Jesus die. They denied and deserted and watched at a distance. Afterwards there was nothing left to do but go to the tomb, to care for a corpse.

They go, days later. The women go first, but instead of finding a dead and decomposing body, they see a stone. They see that the stone that should have shut up that tomb has been rolled away. They go inside the tomb and they do not find a dead body. Instead they are met with dazzling messengers, dazzling messengers who ask them a question: “Why are you looking for the living, among the dead?” And then they are told to share this message with others, with other followers of Jesus, with others who will be followers of Jesus. They go back and tell the disciples. And do you know what the disciples say? The disciples tell the women, “That sounds like a lot of “BLEEEP.” The translation we heard just now is much less colorful, it’s sounds quaint, almost archaic. It translates the word *leiros* as “idle tale.” “It seemed to them an idle tale.” More colloquially, “It seemed to them a load of *leiros*.”

It does sound like a lot of *leiros*—what they found, what happened, that first Easter morning. Two thousand years later, it still confounds our senses, begs credibility, blows our minds, seems unbelievable.

But isn't that the way with *leiros*? I'm talking about the *leiros* that we live in, step in, pile on others. You know *leiros*. You know that *leiros* happens. Yet despite its ubiquity, its prevalence, its funky familiarity, still there is a way in which it begs belief. It begs belief—but that it is. You can't make this *leiros* up. Think of the ways that humans treat one another. Think of the degrading situations that are spun out across geographies and generations. Think of the pain we inflict on each other, and on ourselves. Is not the obscenity on the front page, is not the obscenity in our backyards, unbelievable? It is so confounding, it can only be true. You don't know *leiros*? You do know *leiros*. It's not a new word that you learned just this morning.

Now maybe the gospel writer was not being so colorful. Likely Luke was not being obscene. I do not mean to dishonor sacred text with such speculation. The expansiveness of language makes translation a dance of discretion and context and implication. It could be that "It seemed to them an 'idle tale'" is closer to the reaction the first disciples had at first. "It seemed an idle tale" may be more accurate—and maybe that much more devastating, and maybe that much more familiar. Maybe that's exactly the translation that is most accurate to our contemporary context. Not that *leiros* is too crude, but that what happened is nothing to take too seriously. Is that not as great—or greater—a devastation? Is that not pitiable, to dismiss this greatest hope, hope for humanity raised, humanity made fully and most gloriously alive, hope that this is what God wants for us, and what God does for us? How devastating, to simply write that off, with a cynical shrug.

We are offered another interpretation this morning. Easter offers another read of history—not just what happened one day long ago but of all of human history, including our own personal history. Easter offers another read of history, and an outline of a future that we cannot even quite put into words, a future that God is still speaking into existence. Easter offers us a way of comprehending that future—but you need to learn a new language for that, Easter language.

Easter language holds that physicality matters, that going to tombs and caring for bodies are holy tasks, leading to experience of the Divine; that the pain of having and being flesh is also the presence of God among us. Easter language says that that large stone, that large stone that would block our way, can be rolled away—and not by us. Easter language describes the dazzling consciousness that hovers at the edge of our knowing. That dazzling consciousness hovers, ever questioning us; calling us out of quotidian expectations to a larger awareness, calling us to respond to infinite and urgent questions: "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" Easter language declares what we are and what we share is more than *leiros*, more than an idle tale. Easter language proclaims that this life only is not all there is.

We can learn and practice this Easter language: we can learn and practice it in classrooms and on guided tours; we can play and work in it, too. We can use this language to express our deepest pain and our greatest joy. We can use Easter language to greet one another, and to be pleasant to one another, for Easter language is very much a language of identity and courtesy. The women at the tomb learned that language: "Hello, my name is Mary Magdalene. Hello my name is Joanna. Hello my name is Mary; I'm the mother of James." The disciples learned that language, too. "Please," Peter says, hearing the cock crow, "Please," Peter says, weeping bitterly, "Please forgive my denial." And then, three days later, stooping and looking into the tomb, Peter says in amazement, "Thank you." We have a word, an Easter word, that expresses all of this, and more. You already know this word. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Amen.