***BUT…***

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 15:12-22 and Luke 23:50-24:12

I begin with a disclaimer: I was not an English major, nor an English minor. I can spell reasonably well and generally remember to put a period or question mark at the end of a sentence, but I do not know all the arcane rules of grammar. I once made the mistake of giving one of my sermons to Chris Weller to look over prior to its publication, and when I got it back there was so much red ink covering the pages that I thought perhaps she had cut herself or sacrificed a small animal on it. Nevertheless I have come to appreciate the importance of certain aspects of our language in studying Scripture. As I have told most of you who have attended any of my Bible studies, keep your eyes on the adverbs (like *therefore*) and the conjunctions found amid the verses of Scripture! For those of you who are trying to recall exactly what a conjunction is, it is one of those little words that links other words, phrases, clauses or sentences – a word like *though* or *because* or *and*. The Bible is full of those little words, and they have a big impact on the good news proclaimed. Of all those little conjunctions, perhaps none has a bigger impact than BUT, the three-letter variety.

The passages we read this morning bearing the good news of Easter, are full of buts! In fact the first word chosen by Luke in telling the story of that first Easter day is ***BUT***. Having described Jesus’ burial in the tomb and telling us that the women rested on the Sabbath, Luke begins the account of that Easter morning with these words: “***But*** on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb…” It is a curious choice to begin the account of that first Easter day with ***but***, except that ***but*** is the first hint that something unexpected is about to happen. It hearkens back to Jesus’ death and burial and the silence of the Sabbath that preceded Easter’s dawn. The women had seen Jesus crucified, had seen his broken body taken down from the cross, wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a rock-hewn tomb, before they went home to prepare the spices with which they would anoint his body. And then they observed the Sabbath. One might expect Luke to begin his account of this Easter day in continuity with those previous days, with, “***And then*** on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb”, but instead we get ***but***! It is the first of six ***buts*** that find their way into the twelve verses of Luke’s account of this day – and each of them is significant!

This first not only paves the way for those to come, but also emphasizes the choice the women made. They could have fled from the city where the one they called “Lord” had been crucified. They could have locked themselves behind closed doors in the hope that they might go unnoticed by the authorities who had put Jesus to death. They could have moved on with their lives, their hopes dashed by what they had seen on the cross at Golgotha. “***But*** on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb…” says Luke. Despite the danger, despite their despair, despite the dashing of their hopes and dreams about who Jesus might be, these women got up at the crack of dawn and went to the tomb anyway.

Would you have taken that chance? Would you have dared to go to the tomb without an “all clear” sign? Would you have believed in him after the cross, beyond the tomb where his body was laid? People have stopped believing for far less, have given up following when the following wasn’t nearly so hard or dangerous or seemingly futile, have given up following simply because they got distracted by other things. Would you have gone to the tomb at dawn’s early light or would you have stayed at home?

The women went, and what they found there gave rise to the second ***but*** of the story. Listen to Luke:

*They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,* ***but*** *when they went in, they did not find the body.*

They went to the tomb expecting to find the broken body of their friend and Lord. They expected to enter the tomb and anoint his corpse with the spices they had prepared. They expected to continue mourning his death. ***But*** when they went in, they did not find the body. The tomb was empty of the one thing it was intended to hold – the body of Jesus. While to us here two thousand years removed from that Easter morning the empty tomb shouts RESURRECTION, to the women that morning it suggested no such thing. More practical thoughts came to mind: body snatchers who would not let him rest even in death, grave robbers, authorities denying him a decent burial – lots of possibilities, but resurrection wasn’t one of them!

Writing in *The Presbyterian Outlook* earlier this month, Heidi Husted Armstrong raises the question: “*What if the stone was rolled away not to let Jesus out,* but *to let the women in?”[[1]](#endnote-1)* We assumethe stone was rolled away so that the risen Jesus could walk out, but as he proves in his sudden appearances and disappearances in the post-resurrection accounts recorded in the Gospels, walls do not seem to be an obstacle to the risen Christ. His resurrection body still marked by the nails of the cross does not need to enter through a door. Why then would he need the stone rolled away? If God could raise Jesus from the dead, would a stone really be an impediment to his resurrection? God only knows! But what if the stone was rolled way so that the women could see that the tomb was empty! Then when they met the risen Lord they would know that his body was no longer in the tomb. An empty tomb without a risen Lord suggests little more than a missing body. A risen Lord without an empty tomb suggests a ghost or vision. Perhaps rolling away the stone was an essential step on the road to believing that resurrection was possible, for what we proclaim about Easter is twofold – an empty tomb and a risen Lord – and both have witnesses to confirm them! But that is not the end. There are as yet four more ***buts*** to this story, and the next two are entwined.

Two men in dazzling clothes – angels we assume – appear in the tomb, and the women are terrified, as is pretty much anyone who stands face to face with an angel. The women bow their faces to the ground, “***but***” says Luke, “the men said to them ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, ***but*** has risen.’” These angels are not guardians of the tomb, but heralds of the resurrection! They bear good news for any who dare to go there. They are not there to intimidate and berate those who enter the tomb; they are there to explain what has happened and to urge that good news to be shared. Their declaration is the heart of our Easter celebration: “He is not here, but has risen!” It is the good news which Paul repeats to the church in Corinth: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ***But*** in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”

That ***but*** is the source of our Easter hopes. We come to the tomb expecting death, but find life! We come expecting despair, but find hope! We come expecting to find a crucified corpse, but we meet a risen Lord! Easter’s good news is all wrapped up in those **buts** that exceed our expectations, change our world, and carry over into our lives:

We sin, ***but*** God forgive us!

We die, ***but*** we have new life!

We mourn, ***but*** we mourn with hope!

We are fallible humans, ***but*** God loves us anyway!

We once were lost, ***but*** now are found!

We were blind, ***but*** now we see!

Our Easter joy comes not with *because* or *and* or *though*. Our Easter joy comes with a conjunction that says the world is no longer the way we thought it was, for he is not here, but has risen!

In sharing that good news with the women, the angels reminded them of what Jesus had told them about rising on the third day, and then the women remembered, and because they did, even though they had not seen the risen Lord, they understood the meaning of the empty tomb – He is risen! It was that good news they carried back to the disciples with great joy, great awe and great hope. When they told the disciples what they had seen and heard and understood the response of those disciples was underwhelming, and it is in their responses that we find the final ***buts*** of this story.

The women shared their story with the disciples, “but,” says Luke, “it seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.” The good news was too good, the story too fantastic, their hopes too unrealistic. The good news of Easter dies there at the tomb if it is not believed beyond the tomb. It does not change the reality of resurrection, but if resurrection is not believed then it matters very little. The women believed because they had seen the empty tomb and heard the angels’ speak and recalled Jesus’ words, but the disciples had none of those experiences, and so it seemed no more than an idle tale. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe,” says Jesus. Blessed are they. The disciples were not so blessed – they wanted more than the rantings of a few women. “***But*** Peter got up and ran to the tomb,” writes Luke. Peter did what the women had done – went to the tomb and found it as they had described and went away amazed. To the disciples it was an idle tale, except for Peter who got up and went and saw and returned home amazed. And that is the end of the ***buts***!

Today you’ve heard the testimony of the women and the angels and Luke, but you’ve not seen the empty tomb or the risen Lord for yourself. Can you believe without seeing? Is their testimony enough? What would Luke write of you? He heard the good news of resurrection, ***but*** he found it an idle tale and did not believe it. She heard the good news of resurrection, ***but*** it made no difference in her life or death. They heard the good news of resurrection, ***but*** they could not explain it, and so they doubted and told no one. Ann Weems offers an alternative with her poem, *Room in the Heart*:

*Death abides not on a hill called Golgotha,*

*but in every heart that makes room.*

*Life abides not outside a garden tomb in Jerusalem,*

*but in every heart that makes room.*

May you make room in your heart for life, for hope, for resurrection, for Jesus, for the great ***but*** of this Easter day: ***He is not here, but is risen!*** That is the good news! Alleluia! Amen

1. Heidi Husted Armstrong, “Preaching Resurrection”, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 14, 2016, p.38 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)