

The sounding of the code blue alarm over the hospital public address system interrupted our chaplains meeting. We immediately grew silent, listening intently for the words that would come next, which would alert us to the specific location of the code within the hospital.

I was one of about a dozen chaplain interns and residents serving the Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta. We were seminary students and pastors from a variety of faith traditions engaged in a pastoral formation program called clinical pastoral education.

At Grady, when the code blue alarm was sounded over the hospital intercom, it meant that someone was in very critical condition, at the point of death, and it was the call for crash carts to be activated and doctors and nurses and specialists to respond to the room without delay. As chaplain interns and residents, each of us had been assigned units in the hospital that were our “parishes.” My units that summer included the surgical intensive care unit and a thoracic general medicine wing, so I listened intently to the announcement to see if the code happened to be in one of my units.

“Code blue!” “Code blue!” came the call. And then came words that stopped us in our tracks. “Code blue to the morgue.”

Everyone in that room full of chaplain interns and residents either held an advanced degree in some form of religious studies or was in the process of earning one. Everyone in that room was a man or a woman of deep personal faith. And everyone in that room sat in stunned silence.

After all, none of us had been assigned to the morgue. And after a moment, a few began to crack jokes. “I bet some poor medical resident has some explaining to do,” said someone. Someone else began to quote lines from Miracle Max in the movie *The Princess Bride*, about the difference mostly dead and all dead.

I didn’t draw the short straw to answer the code in the morgue, but it turns out that a woman had been called to identify the body of a deceased loved one, and when she saw the body, she fainted from her grief, and the morgue technician, who was perhaps a little out of practice at finding a pulse, called for the code blue out of an abundance of caution. By the time the crash team arrived downstairs in the morgue, the woman was already alert and oriented, and so everyone went back to work with a good story to tell.

It had been three days. Three days since Jesus had breathed his last and died. Three days since his body had been hastily placed in a borrowed tomb. The window of opportunity for life-saving resuscitation, for a miraculous recovery, had long since passed. All that

was left to do was go and finish the burial preparations that had been interrupted by the Sabbath sundown.

So at first light on the first day of the week, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. So they stood there, perplexed, when suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and fell 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.”

And then the women remembered the words of Jesus, and returning from the tomb, they told this to the eleven and to all the rest. These eleven men may not have held advanced degrees in religious studies, but they didn’t need to, because for three years, they had walked with Jesus himself.

For three years, they had watched Jesus bring sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf.

When Jesus had fed 5,000 men, plus who knows how many women and children, with just a few loaves of bread and some scraps of fish, they were the ones toting all the baskets of leftovers.

When Jesus took the hand of a dead little girl and said, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up,” and she got up and began to walk about,

Peter, James, and John had been right there in the room.

At least three times, Jesus himself had told these men that he was going to Jerusalem, where he would be handed over, killed, and then rise again.

But early on the first day of the week, when the women returned from the tomb and reported to the eleven and the rest about what they had seen and heard, these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

An idle tale indeed. In the entirety of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, this is the only time that Luke uses this particular word that usually gets translated into English as idle tale or nonsense. In fact, it’s the only time this word shows up in the entire New Testament. And our English translators have cleaned it up a bit, because it’s a Greek idiom that can also be translated as rubbish, or drivel, or, in Texas, what we call the stuff that comes out of the north end of a southbound bull.

Of all the people in the world, these eleven men were in the best position to know and understand what these women were telling them, but they believed them not, and they dismissed their story as an idle tale.

And can you blame them? Because resurrection doesn’t make any sense. It doesn’t fit any of our categories or ways of experiencing the world.

There's a reason we chaplains didn't want to answer that code blue call. Because the idea that anyone could be alive again *three days* after being dead and buried just flat-out frightens us. An idle tale indeed.

But what if the testimony of these women is true?

If the testimony of these women is true, then the entire trajectory of human history and human destiny has been irrevocably altered by this singular event.

If the testimony of these women is true, then it changes everything we think we know about matters of life and death.

If the testimony of these women is true, then we have to rethink all of our human categories of love and hate, goodness and evil, hope and fear, faith and doubt, and the list goes on and on.

No wonder these eleven men were so quick to dismiss the testimony of this small group of women – because if their testimony is true, then they will have to change their entire worldview, and the only person who likes change is a wet baby.

I've never had the privilege of serving on a jury. I've been summoned a few times, but clergy rarely if ever get empaneled on a jury. But sometime this week, sometime before we're gathered here again, you're going to get

summoned. You're going to get called – not to the jury box, but to the witness stand. You're going to be called upon give testimony.

Some of us have come of age in Christian traditions that teach that a testimony is a pitch, a story that needs to be dramatic and rehearsed, and it needs to end with a call to action.

But the women who returned from the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week had no time to rehearse their story or develop a sales pitch. And they gave no call to action at the end. They simply confessed what they had seen and heard and believed to be true about Jesus of Nazareth.

And that's what you will be called to do sometime this week. It might happen in your workplace or your school or in the aisle of the grocery store, but sometime very soon, you're going to be called to the stand to testify, to give an account of what you've seen and heard and believe to be true about this Jesus of Nazareth.

The person or people who receives your testimony will be the ones in the jury box. They'll be listening intently. They'll be trying to square your descriptions with their own experiences. They'll be listening to your words, they'll be observing your body language, and they'll be incorporating everything else they've come to know about you. And so you should know the very fact that

you're right here in this room this morning makes your testimony suspect.

Because even today, on this highest of holy days of the year, even here in Athens, Georgia, the heart of the so-called Bible Belt, at this very moment, there are more people gathered in our city's coffee shops and restaurants and parks, or just at home sleeping in or enjoying another cup of coffee, than there are in its houses of worship.

Much ink has been spilled in recent years about the steady decline of attendance in American churches. The data suggests that with a few exceptions here and there, even the so-called mega churches in our nation aren't as mega as they were 10 and 20 years ago.

And so the very fact that you're here this morning makes you weird. The very fact that you went to the trouble to get out of bed, get dressed, and if you have kids, went through the ordeal of just getting shoes on your children, on a Sunday, for heaven's sake, and you came down here and by some divine miracle found a place to park and found a place to sit, the very fact that you went to all that trouble, well, I for one am impressed by you. Whether you are here every time the doors are open, or whether you're just passing through, your very presence here this morning is a gift to all of us. But you should know that when compared to most of your peers in this town, you're weird.

But here's what I want us to remember as we leave this place today. Those people out there in the coffee shops and the parks or on the tee box or at home, I'm willing to wager that almost all of them have heard this story before. Almost all of them have heard the story of Easter.

And so they're looking at us, those of us who took the trouble to come down here to sing and pray this morning, and they're not asking, "Is this story true?" Some of them, I'm sure, think it's an idle tale or worse.

But I suspect that there's a Peter or two out there, too. A Peter who talks a big game, but when the chips are down, is nowhere to be found. A Peter who, if it's politically expedient, will deny ever having heard the name of Jesus. A Peter who desperately needs to hear your good news this week.

And the Peters out there, they're not just listening to our words. They're watching how we drive. They're stalking us on our social media feeds. They're watching what we choose to do and choose not to do with God's money. They're observing how we treat and talk about people who look and think, and act differently than we do. And they're not asking if our testimony about Jesus is true. They want to know – does it seem to make even an ounce of difference as we do this thing called life together.

So as we leave here today, may we summon the courage of our great-great-grandmothers in the faith, Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them.

Like them, may we remember Jesus' words.

May we return from the tomb.

And may our whole lives be a testimony to what we have seen and heard about Jesus of Nazareth, so that the Peters out there, who so desperately need to hear the good news, might get up and run to the empty tomb, and have a look for themselves.

To God be the glory. Amen.