

The Living Among the Dead

It wasn't what they were expecting. The women who went to Jesus' tomb that morning thought they knew exactly what to expect and what they got, wasn't it. After all, they had been there on Friday. Luke records that they had stood at some distance from the cross and seen him suffer, perhaps heard his cry of release, seen him die. They had seen his lifeless body pried from the cross and wrapped in linen by Joseph of Arimathea. They had followed Joseph as he took Jesus' body to his own family tomb; they saw the body laid to rest. They knew where Jesus was and what Jesus was. He was a dead man. They had hoped that he might be the one to redeem Israel but he was dead; dead and buried. They retreated to the place they were staying, too far from home for comfort after that dreadful night and day, and they prepared to do the only thing left to be done for their dead teacher and friend. They gathered the spices they would use to anoint his body after the Sabbath. And then they took their Sabbath rest, grieving, frightened, confused at what had happened, but confident in one thing: Jesus was dead.

And so, on the morning of the first day of the week, after the Sabbath was past and as soon as it was light enough for them to see what they were doing, they took their spices and they went to the tomb. Now, we have become accustomed to envisioning this scene in a garden, thanks to the Gospel of John and the beautiful old hymn, "In the Garden." We may think of the place of Jesus' burial being a beautiful shaded place of trees and flowers with perhaps one or two neatly kept tombs cut into hillocks. But it wouldn't have been like that at all, nor would it have been anything like our own Evergreen-Washilli or any of the other nearby modern cemeteries. The Rev. Dr. Judith Jones has written a more likely description of the scene: "The hillside would have been honeycombed with tombs, filled with moldering bones and rotting flesh, the ancient dead as well as the more recently deceased. And these tombs would have been sealed generally by the presence of a cut stone placed across the door... the seals would not by any stretch of the imagination have been air-tight. So—paths among tombs, tombs filled with death, the air thick with it." A few years ago, Connie and I took a week's vacation in New Orleans. One of the things that was on our list to do was to tour one of the city's historic cemeteries, famous for their aboveground tombs with exquisite funerary architecture. On the day we attempted to take the tour, we arrived too late, the gates of the cemetery were locked and all we could do was peer in. But on that hot Southern day, the smell of even those ancient graves and the palpable sense of death was overwhelming to our modern sensibilities. The place where the women expected to find Jesus would have been unmistakably a place of death.

But what they found was quite different from what they expected. Indeed, a whole set of expectations, theirs and those of the other disciples, began to be upset that morning. Luke prepares his readers for this from the very beginning of the story. He tells us that they witnessed the events of Friday, that they rested on Saturday, and then he begins the new section with "But on the first day of the week..." The word "but," the "defiant conjunctive," as Richard Wardlaw calls it, is repeated over and over again in Luke's Easter account. "Look out," Luke tells us, "this isn't what you expect." Instead of their friend's dead body, the women find the tomb opened, "*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."

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Many times, over the years, I've heard good Christian people scoff at the women and the other disciples for being so slow at grasping the idea that Jesus had been raised from the dead by God. They almost always point to the same reason given by the angels who greet these women: "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." What we fail to take into account when we speak of their lack of faith is that they had absolutely no point of reference for what happened. If, like the Pharisees, they believed in a resurrection at all, for the Sadducees and other Jews did not, then they were expecting one resurrection of all the just at the last day. They had seen Jesus raise the dead, but who was to raise Jesus? They could not fathom that God would act in such a way for just one individual. It seemed like nonsense to them under their system of belief.

And, on a more personal, elemental level, even coming from an apparently angelic source, news of a resurrection must have seemed unbelievable to them, overwhelmed as they were with the experience of death. To Peter and the others, coming from a group of hysterical women rather than from a heavenly messenger, the news "seemed to them an idle tale." I can imagine the scene: Peter, James, John and the rest, sitting slumped in their borrowed lodgings, still grieving the death of their beloved Master, still quaking each time steps drew near the door, wondering if the Sanhedrin would send guards for them next, now that the Sabbath was past. In their despair, the women's scarcely believable news must have seemed like a cruel joke. Their minds were on death, not on life, and they could not find the living among the dead. As I consider their frame of mind, defeated, grieving, expecting death for themselves, I am reminded of the Scottish thane in Shakespeare's great tragedy. Near the end of the play, Macbeth is told of his wife's death and in his despair he proclaims all of life not just an idle tale, but a tale told by an idiot:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

In his own grief, despair and fear, Peter could not believe that what the women said was anything but that tale told by an idiot. He was sure they were raving. We men know, after all, how you women can be. But... But... But something in him got him to his feet and out the door and up to that hill. And he didn't know what to think about what he found, or didn't find there. He had been wrong, of course, as we men often are.

Is it any wonder that there are people today who refuse to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus? Is it any wonder that even professing Christians, clergymen and women in positions of denominational leadership, reject the factuality of this story out of hand? Even Jesus' own followers, those who reputedly heard him promise this conclusion, those who first saw and then didn't see his body in the tomb, even they could not process this astounding event. The problem,

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then as now, is that in order to believe in that miracle of life, we must completely reject the power of death.

Too much of the time, too many of us live our lives as if we were under the power of the world, the power of death. Anything that rules our lives that is not the power of God, the power of Creative Love, is the power of death. Our lives may be ruled by money, position, power, comfort, desire, fear, anger or simple complacency. Our lives may be controlled by addiction to food or drugs or drink or sex or gambling. We may cling fiercely to the idea that we are the captains of our own destiny. If our lives are not guided by God, they are given over to death. And we will not find Jesus in the realm of death. We cannot expect to discover the living among the dead.

Fortunately for us, as for Peter, there is something within us that makes us want to check out this idle tale, something deep inside that makes us want this story to be true, ridiculous though it seems. Perhaps it's only our unquenchable desire for a happy ending. Perhaps it's that "God-shaped hole" within each of us, referred to by theologians and philosophers as diverse as St. Augustine, Blaise Pascal, Jean-Paul Sartre and Paul "Bono" Hewson. But we gather in this place, on Easter and on every first day of the week, either because we do believe this story to be true or because we want to believe that it's true and true in a way that makes a difference for us.

I do believe this story is true, factually, metaphorically and in all ways. Perhaps more importantly, I do believe that the underlying truth of this story, however you might define it, makes a difference for us. First of all, it is a sign, a sign that the world as we know it has already begun to change, that the power of death is not preeminent. I like how the British theologian N.T. Wright describes it: "The women rushing around in the early morning, Peter scratching his head staring at empty grave-clothes, might well be puzzled: this was not part of the plan. They had thought Jesus' language about his own dying, and rising again, to be a dark metaphor, indicating perhaps a great struggle against paganism or Israel's current leaders, followed by a great victory. They had not reckoned with it being literal, or with the battle being waged against the last enemy, death itself. They were going to have to get used to living in a present which was shot through with God's future, a world in which the continuing disjointedness of creation was to be seen as out of date, waiting to be brought into line with the future which had already begun to happen." God's work of creation continues – the chaos of the void and the darkness that ruled over the face of the deep continue to be pushed back as God's light truly enlivens more and more of the world. If we stand with God and God's Christ, we are on the winning side.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus means that our personal lives have been, are and will be changed. This is not just a promise of paradise to come but a reality of the power right now, today, to overthrow whatever claim the power of death has in our lives. This morning we celebrate God raising Jesus as the first fruits from the dead, but Jesus is not the only harvest. All of us can claim to be his brothers and sisters, his joint-heirs to the Kingdom of God. Jesus told his disciples, "You shall receive power," and so they did and so we do and shall, to transform our lives into true life, unfettered and unafraid, just as God always intended us to be. Just as Jesus was marked as the Beloved, so are we beloved of God. Each of us may with confidence echo our choir's song: "As long as God and I shall be, I am His and He is mine."

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Finally, I believe that the reality of the resurrection means that we are both called and empowered to impact the world as a part of God's continuing work of creation. As the Body of Christ here on Earth, sharing in his resurrection power, we also share in his mission as recalled by Luke: to bring the Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Again, from Tom Wright: "Because of this hope, the resurrection of Jesus means that the present time is shot through with great significance. What is done to the glory of God in the present is genuinely building for God's future. Acts of justice and mercy, the creation of beauty and the celebration of truth, deeds of love and the creation of communities of kindness and forgiveness – these all matter, and they matter forever." And Michaela Bruzzese has written, "The assurance of life's triumph over death is the only weapon we need for our constant struggle for justice in the world. We, too, have been set free, free from death in all its forms—fear, despair, apathy. We cannot linger in the graveyards of hopelessness and resignation. We must seek the living Christ where he is to be found—walking with us, in our midst, as we continue to build the kingdom as he did—among those excluded."

In the past weeks, I have spoken about endings, about the last oasis on Jesus' journey, about his journey's end in Jerusalem, about the ending of our Lenten journey at the foot of the cross. But in reality, our journey does not end there. It does not end at the tomb, in the graveyard, with a dead body and dead hopes and dead dreams. Instead of an ending, we have reached a new beginning, the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, a time that has not yet been fulfilled in all of creation but is begun in our hearts and in the impact our lives have on the world around us. As we go from this place this day, let us remember that we take the good news and the power of the resurrection with us. Into a world that is wintry, dismal, ruled by death, we take the true springtime, true life and true love of God. We do not seek the living among the dead. We are the living, raised from spiritual death by the one who, through the love of God, conquered all death. We carry the Good News that life is available to all. Let us proclaim it with joy: Christ is Risen! Alleluia! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!