

Message for Resurrection of Our Lord (Easter Day), Year C (4/17/2022)
 Luke 24:1-12

Of all the Sundays for Jesus to be absent from the Gospel story, it's Easter. Go figure. Later in the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke, the risen Jesus will come alongside the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and become known to them at their evening meal; elsewhere he'll appear to Simon, and eventually to all the disciples. But here, at early dawn, Jesus is nowhere to be found. So, although today's festival is called Resurrection of Our Lord, Luke's Easter morning account is not a story of the resurrection per se. It's a story of the empty tomb.¹

And, since Jesus hasn't actually turned up yet, we can forgive the women for their perplexity. *Who rolled the stone away from the entrance to the tomb*, they must wonder, *and more importantly, where is the body?* In light of all the trauma of Jesus' arrest and abuse and execution, the disappearance of his remains must be salt in their wounds. Enter two mysterious figures who represent only further cause for alarm. Shaken, the women bow their heads. And, the two strangers finally break the silence: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

This question is the centerpiece of today's Gospel. It's unique to Luke's version of the story, so he must have had a good reason to include it. And at first, it might sound like a reproach: *What are you doing here? Don't you remember that Jesus said he would rise again on the third day? Why didn't you trust him?*

¹ See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 835. See also *Pulpit Fiction* episode 482.

But, I don't hear the strangers' question as a scolding. If they're angels, after all – if they've come to deliver a divine message – then on Easter morning it must be a message of hope and encouragement: *Why do you look for the living among the dead?* that is, *Why do you assume you'll find Jesus here? He can't be in the tomb because he's already making good on God's promise to overcome death – his own death, yes, and yours, too. Remember!* In other words, Easter intends to shift the disciples' perspective: *You're looking for death*, the angels' question implies, *but if you're looking for Jesus, you should be looking for life.*

This encounter doesn't clear everything up, however. The women return immediately to tell the rest of the disciples what they've seen and heard, and on this point the Gospels agree: women are the first preachers of the resurrection. But, the message in and of itself is not enough; their words seem to the others nothing more than an "idle tale." Leave it to the men not to take the women seriously. But, credit Peter, I suppose, for going back to the tomb to see for himself. He finds the graveclothes lying by themselves, but nothing more. Neither does he receive confirmation of the angels' news. So, he returns home "amazed," yet unconvinced.

The disciples' bewilderment on Easter morning, albeit understandable, does not yet amount to faith.² The empty tomb presents the possibility of resurrection, but the truth of resurrection remains to be seen.

² See Green, 836.

And, that ambiguous in-between place is where I imagine many of us find ourselves this morning, too. Like the disciples, we are certainly acquainted with death. Just read the news, or visit a hospital. If you go looking for death, friends, you're going to find it. And, the prevailing wisdom is that death has the final word. The proof is everywhere from the global to the deeply personal; it seems that we're as powerless to prevent war and mass violence as we are to prevent illness and decline – that of our loved ones, and eventually our own. So, it's reasonable to identify with the women as they arrive at the tomb to do the only thing they know how to do in the face of death: bear witness to it once more. There's no reason to hope for anything else, is there?

But on Easter morning, we are confronted with the messengers' question, too: *Why do you look for the living among the dead?* And like the women, we're compelled to reexamine our expectations. It's easy to get caught in cycles of death – to become preoccupied with the worst-case scenario, trapped in destructive patterns in our relationships, constricted by harmful self-talk, beleaguered by the sheer volume of pain and grief in the world. And, there's a strange comfort in fixing our gaze on what seems hopeless; if we keep our expectations low, then we can't be disappointed.

But, Easter intends to shift our perspective: *You're looking for death, but turn your attention elsewhere. Since Jesus is risen, he won't be found in the tomb, but on the road and in the breaking of the bread and wherever you find yourselves*

huddled in fear. Where even two or three of you are gathered, he'll be there in your midst, and he'll go with you even to the ends of the Earth. You'll meet him in the faces of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the captive, and the love you give one another will be his own love. He'll accompany you over peaks and through valleys, and finally through the valley of the shadow of death, so that he might be with you even there. Remember!

Beloved people of God, on Easter morning, we have a chance to get caught in cycles of life. We don't need to deny death in order to fully live; on the contrary, when we face the reality of death, we are freer to live in faith, hope, and love. To look for life means to bear witness to those places where tombs are already being emptied out – where people are already healing, where justice and peace are already taking root, where love is already transforming hostility. And where we find it, we get a foretaste of that great feast to come, when God will accomplish for the whole world what God accomplished for Jesus that first Easter morning,³ and gather up all things in heaven and on Earth into life eternal. Alleluia, Christ is risen!

³ See Danielle Shroyer, paraphrasing N.T. Wright, in *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in Its Rightful Place*, 174.