

Easter Sunday
Why Do You Look for the Living Among the Dead?

Text Luke 24:4-8

TEXT: On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” ⁸ Then they remembered his words.

⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Dear Friends in Christ,
Happy Easter!

Have you ever had trouble finding someone’s house? Imagine that you’re driving around and you keep looking at your directions or your GPS and peering at street signs, and you just can’t find it. You start to become a little frustrated and perhaps even less than charitable toward whoever gave you the directions, positioned the streets signs, or programmed that stupid electronic device that keeps leading you astray. Then you spot someone walking along the road. So you pull up and ask the person, “Can you tell me where so and so lives? The house is supposed to be right around here somewhere!” The person along the side of the road looks around. All he can see for acres in any direction are tombstones. He doesn’t know what to say, because you’re looking for the living among the dead. Do you think you could ever be that lost? Probably not. This morning, in God’s Word, we see a group of women looking for Jesus in a cemetery and an angel asking them, “**Why do you look for the living among the dead?**”

I.

Of course, you know the story. These women weren’t stupid or confused. They went to the last place anyone had seen Jesus: the tomb where Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had laid his body just before sundown on Friday. When we hear the angel’s question, “**Why do you look for the living among the dead?**” the natural answer is “**Where else would he be?**”

These women had gotten up early that morning because in love they didn’t want to leave Jesus’ body in the tomb without the proper burial preparations. In that time and place, there were no funeral directors to take care of things like that. On the way there, they talked about the practical problem of getting into a tomb that was sealed by a large boulder. However, when they got there, nothing was the way they thought it would be. The Roman guards Pilate had posted were gone. The stone was rolled away, and inside they found grave clothes scattered on the ground and a cloth neatly folded where his head had been—but no body. That’s when two men in shining robes—two angels—appeared and said, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!*”

Don’t those words sound like a rebuke? The angel thought these women should have known better than to come to the tomb looking for a dead Jesus. They should’ve known he would be alive on Easter morning. Jesus had prepared them for this moment as well as anyone could have. Again and again, going all the way back to Galilee, he had told his disciples that he was going to die and then rise, but they never understood what he was talking about. They failed to grasp the simple sense of his words. They kept trying to make them into a parable. The angel was asking these women why they didn’t understand what Jesus had promised.

You and I might be more sympathetic to these women than the angels were. Angels are holy. They see God all the time. They don’t know what it’s like to be wrong, to be weak in faith, or to misunderstand God. But we’re sinners. We’ve

been wrong so many times in our lives about so many things, especially spiritual things, that we can totally understand why these women never grasped the promise Jesus made. After all, who comes back from the dead? At this time in history, life was cheap. Almost half of all children died before they reached adulthood. Fevers and infections that you and I cure by taking easily available drugs, killed people back then. These women had probably done this kind of duty before for people who were close to them. Never had any of those bodies been living again three days after they died. It seems unfair to us to rebuke these women for having the natural reaction in a situation like this.

They should have known better. Just weeks before, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had raised other people too. These women knew that. Now, someone might ask, “But who was going to raise Jesus?” But the point of those miracles was to show that Jesus had power over life and death. The angels reminded them, “Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” They should have trusted his promise and come to the tomb in hope, but sin and doubt ruled their minds, and they reached the tomb thinking Jesus was dead.

The angels rebuked these women because the angels were holy. They had the same perspective God has. They were speaking in God’s place. We can make all the excuses in the world for these women, but that won’t change the fact that their faith wasn’t strong enough to cling to God’s promises at this horrible moment in their lives. Why would we want to defend their sinful weakness? Well, that’s obvious, isn’t it? We identify with these humble women who did love their Lord. Our faith is often weak too. When we hurt, when life seems impossible, when death is looking us in the face—our own death or the death of people we love—the natural response for us is simply to try to cope. It’s natural for us to tell ourselves that death is just a part of life. The natural response is for us to wrap ourselves in sorrow and just focus on the practical needs at hand. We can easily leave Jesus and his promises out of the picture.

Is that so very different from what these women did when they looked for their Lord in a tomb? The angels owe us the same rebuke. But remember what they said in the very next breath: “He is not here; he has risen!” In his great love, Jesus did the impossible. He died on the cross and paid for our sin and then rose from the dead. Now death does not win in our lives. All those who die trusting in Jesus will live with him forever—even if their faith is weak like it was for these women on that first Easter morning. Day by day, the power of the resurrection—the gospel—is a living force that changes our hearts. It is the source of strength for our faith, especially on the days when life hurts and death comes.

II.

What difference does it make if you look for a name on a mailbox or a tombstone? You can probably find most names in both places, but you can only visit a friend in one of those places. That’s the point the angels were making. **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”** Someone might ask, **“What difference does it make?”**

It makes all the difference in the world! All too often, when our faith is weak, when we’re dissatisfied, when we feel guilty and foolish and unproductive, we look for Jesus in all the wrong places. Where are we supposed to find Jesus? We find Jesus in the gospel. We find him in the Word that’s preached and taught to us. We find him in our Bibles. We find him in our baptisms, which washed our sins away, and in Communion, where we receive the actual body and blood of the Lord. But that isn’t the natural place for sinners to look for him. We want to find him in our own hearts. We look for him in our feelings. We feel a need to hear him speak to us in all the little miracles that happen to us day after day.

That isn’t where the angel told these women to look. He told them to remember what Jesus had said to them. He told them to remember the gospel: Jesus died and rose for them. And he says the same thing to us. My friends, our hearts are corrupt. They are full of sin and false ideas. If we go looking for the Son of God there, if we imagine that the Holy Spirit will speak to us in our lives and in our hopes and in being true to ourselves, we’re looking for the living among the dead. The great irony of the resurrection is that Jesus is not found where people expect him to be. Instead, he’s found right where he said he would be: in the gospel. And it’s only the hardness of our sinful hearts that wants him to be someplace else.

The angels at the tomb knew that. So they repeated the message Jesus had been telling his disciples ever since they left Galilee: “The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.” If the women and the disciples had understood that message, the weekend of Good Friday through Easter Sunday might have been easier for them to bear, but they didn’t understand. They were sinners, just like we are. So when Jesus was crucified, their hearts were broken and they could find no comfort. All they could do was carry on with the concrete tasks at hand—like preparing his body for burial. Jesus’ words were still the power of God, but his followers didn’t understand them because they wanted Jesus to be something different than what he was. They didn’t want to see him as a man who came here to die.

But my friends, that's exactly why Jesus came—to die! He came to die, because our hearts are sinful, because we look for Jesus in all the foolish places our sinful hearts tell us to, because God has to drag us, kicking and screaming, as it were, to his Word and sacraments. Jesus died because our faith is weak. He died because all sinful hearts deserve to die and spend eternity in hell. When he died, he paid for every sinful heart—including ours.

On Easter Sunday, Jesus rose! His resurrection is God's proof that Jesus did all that he came to do. Jesus' resurrection says that he has paid for every sin of every sinner who has ever lived and ever will live. He has paid for your sins and mine. It's God's promise that we don't have any sin left to pay for. Our accounts are now clear. Our record is now clean. That will always be true for us. God does not even hold over our heads the sins that we still struggle with or the failures that still torment our hearts. God calls us perfect because Jesus rose. And God promised in his resurrection that we too will rise. Death cannot hold us anymore. God has crippled death. When Jesus returns, God will kill death and we will live with him forever.

That's what the angel meant when he said, "Remember what he told you." Luke says, "*Then they remembered his words.*" Suddenly, it all came flooding back to them. With this simple expression, Luke shows the power of the Holy Spirit to create, strengthen, and clarify faith. And what did they remember? They remembered the gospel, the promise of everlasting life. That's where the power is, and when these women heard it, they believed. Now, did they still need to grow in their faith? Of course! There was so much more to learn. They still had years to live on this earth. They still would have to die themselves. God was just beginning a process of maturing their faith to face life and death. When they remembered Jesus' promise and began to understand that he had kept it, they began to trust in all God's promises.

Jesus' return to life brings us back to life. We don't want to look for him among the dead, but he did have to look for us in a spiritual graveyard. Our hearts were dead in trespasses and sins, but his resurrection is more powerful than sin or death. It creates new life. It changes who and what we are. The truth is that on our own, we would only look for Jesus in the wrong places. So he came to us. We have him every time we come to Communion and every time we remember the gift he gave us in Baptism. We have him every time we hear the gospel. Do we still have room to grow? Of course we do! For as long as we live here, we will need to grow in our faith and our understanding. Sometimes we will even need to hear the gospel personally and privately. God has called me to hear your confession and to tell you that you are forgiven. God has called me to care for you spiritually in the hurt and sorrows of life. The tool he gave me is that gospel. It's the power of God. Jesus rose. That makes all the difference in this world, because now we will live with him forever.

Today, we celebrate the fact that Jesus' tomb was empty, that God rolled the stone away, that the women heard the greatest proclamation of all time: He is not here. He has risen just as he said he would. Jesus kept his promise. We don't have to go to a cemetery to find him. We don't need to tend his grave. He is alive. Because he is alive, God promises us that all our sins are wiped out and forgotten. Because he is alive, God promises us that we will live with him forever. Because he is alive, we have a new life already here—our life of faith in him. Enjoy that life now. Look forward to eternal life with him! Amen.