

Living Among the Dead

Easter 2

April 28, 2019

I imagine that many of you have been wondering “didn’t we do this last week?” And of course we did. Last Sunday was Easter, we read the account of the empty tomb and we prayed the Easter Liturgy and proclaimed that the Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!! So maybe we don’t really need to do it all again today. But we are, for a number of reasons.

The first is the Easter isn’t just a single Sunday, it is actually a season. In the church year, the season of Easter lasts for 50 days. These are days that correspond with the days between Easter and Pentecost. Each Sunday of Easter is a celebration of the resurrection. After reading the account of the actual resurrection, we read the accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. Actually today should be the story of Doubting Thomas but I preached on that one last year, “Stop Doubting But Don’t Stop Believing”. Next week will be Jesus’ reinstating Peter (“Simon, do you love me?...Yes Lord you know I love you...Feed my sheep”) Then in a few weeks, the official season of Easter will conclude as we consider the account of Jesus’ ascension into heaven.

The second reason that we are doing Easter all over again today is that EVERY Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. It is why we worship on Sunday instead of Saturday. Remember the Jews have celebrated the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday for centuries. But because Jesus rose from the grave on “the first day of the week” those who follow him began to observe Sunday as our day of worship as a way of celebrating the resurrection every week.

And the final reason we are “doing Easter” again this week is a personal one. Sometime this week, as I was planning this service, I realized that I haven’t preached an Easter message in a long time. Last week, Larry preached and I led the Liturgy, then

the previous two years, Worth preached on Easter. Previous to that, in 2015 and 2016 when my wife and I were serving at Fries Memorial, I led the Easter Sunrise Service at Salem. Because that was so time consuming and energy draining, my wife preached on those Easter Sundays. The best I can figure, I haven't preached an Easter message in 5 years. And by Easter message, I mean a message about the before dawn discovery of the empty tomb. So here is my long overdue Easter message. Which will begin, as I like to do, with a question.

Who knows what is missing from Luke's account of the resurrection? That's right, Jesus is missing. He is not there because he has risen. He is missing in both Luke and Mark's accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb. Jesus does appear in Matthew and John's versions of the story. In Matthew, the risen Jesus appears to the women who are on their way to tell the disciples about the empty tomb. And in John, he appears to Mary Magdalene, who mistakes him for the gardener. But in Luke, there is no appearance by Jesus until he shows up on the road to Emmaus. There is no Jesus, the women who discover the empty tomb are only left with this message *"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."*

The same is true for us. We haven't seen the resurrected Christ, at least not in bodily form. We only have the message that he is risen, that we don't need to look for the living among the dead. Think about how much easier it would be if we had more than the word of resurrection, more than that message. Think how much easier it would be if God would work differently. It would seem so much easier to have Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women arrive at the tomb and watch Jesus walk out into the light of a new day.

And imagine how much easier it would be for us if Jesus would simply appear in dazzling glory as we gather on Easter morning thousands of years later. Imagine how much easier it would be to **show** Jesus to people instead of having to rely on just

conveying the message of the resurrection. Because by itself the message of the resurrection makes no sense.

What Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women were doing on that first Easter day made sense. They were going to take care of their dead friend's body. I am sorry for being so blunt, but that was the situation. Jesus was dead. He had been crucified and died on the cross. Pilate's soldiers made sure he was dead, there was no doubt about it. Because Jesus had died at the very beginning of the Sabbath, the normal work of preparing his body for burial had to wait until the Sabbath was over. So they hastily stashed his body in a borrowed tomb, planning to return to finish their work after the Sabbath was over, just as all observant Jews would do. It made sense for them to return to the tomb and do what needed to be done.

What they found at the tomb made no sense. First the stone, which was sealing the tomb shut, had been rolled away. The women show a remarkable amount of bravery and enter the tomb, not knowing what they might find there. I learned just this week how brave that actually was. We had something unique happen in our God's Acre. We had a grave disinterred. One of the people who had been buried here was being moved to another location to be buried with her more recently deceased husband. On Wednesday morning, they came to remove the remains. I walked down to God's Acre just to see what all was involved and to say a prayer for the journey of the remains. What they actually did was remove not only the casket but the entire vault. It looked like what it was, a large concrete container. Yet it was still unsettling to see the grave opened up.

That experience gave me just a small glimpse of what it must have been like for Mary and the others to find Jesus' tomb opened up. But their curiosity overcame their fears and they went inside the open tomb. Who knows what they expected to find, but

the one thing that they did not find was Jesus's body. It was gone, and though Jesus was dead beyond a doubt, his body was gone.

Luke writes that they were "perplexed" about this. While that is a perfectly good description, meaning completely baffled or very puzzled, of how they must have felt, I don't think that it quite does it justice. If I were writing this account, I would have said something more like they were "totally freaked out by this" or if someone younger than I were writing it, they might have said that the women were "shook" by what they found, or didn't find. It was definitely not what they expected. And then things got weirder.

Suddenly two men dressed in dazzling clothes are standing there in the tomb. This pushes them from being "shook" or "freaked out" or "perplexed" to being terrified. And who could blame them. The men (angels?) then ask them the question: "*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*" And before they can even begin to think about an answer (for it was a rhetorical question though they didn't realize it), the men give them the message of the resurrection: "*He is not here, but has risen. 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.*"

This is all they get. They don't get to see Jesus, they don't get any proof, other than the empty tomb, which is circumstantial proof at best. Just because Jesus' body is gone, it doesn't prove that he has risen. Someone could have removed his body or stolen it. He is not there, but it doesn't mean he has risen. Yet those words "*He is not here, but has risen.*" and the reminder that Jesus had told them that all of this would happen, are enough to convince those women that it is true. So they carry the resurrection message to Jesus' closest friends. Who do not believe them.

So what about us? Will we do the same? Will we carry the message of the resurrection to the very ends of the earth, no matter who believes us, no matter who hears us? Will we look for the living among the dead?

The message of the resurrection is all that we have. We have not seen the resurrected Jesus. We have experienced him, we know him, but we have not seen him. So all that we have is the proclamation that the Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!! And maybe that is enough.

It worked for Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women. Though the disciples didn't believe them at first eventually they did. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. We wouldn't be here if they didn't believe that the Lord is risen. And we wouldn't be here if they had not proclaimed that message to others. And others will not come to know Jesus unless we do the same, unless we proclaim, over and over and over again, that message of the resurrection, that the Lord is risen!

The message of the resurrection, the message that the Lord is risen indeed! Is the very essence of our faith. It is the message of Easter, past, present and future. However the words that the first communicators of that message, what those men in the tomb, the ones dressed in dazzling clothes, said is not quite accurate. They said that "he is not here, but has risen." The tomb was empty, Jesus was gone, he **had** risen, but he also **is** risen.

Have you ever wondered why we say "the Lord is risen" instead of "the Lord has risen", even though that isn't quite grammatically correct? Jesus had risen from the dead and he remains risen from the dead. The message of the resurrection, the Lord is risen, is designed to emphasize--for theological reasons--the present state of a past action. Jesus rose from death and remains risen to this very day. The Lord is risen indeed!

We are called to do what they did, to do what those women did, what Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women did and tell of this to all of the world. We are called to tell the world that Jesus is a risen savior and he is in the world today. That he was handed over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification, that death has been swallowed up in victory. And that through him we too can live in eternal righteousness, innocence and happiness; since he, being risen from the dead, lives and reigns, forever and ever.

Jesus lives forever and he loves forever. And there is nothing that can separate us from that love. As we pray in our liturgy, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depths, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing in all the world, or even beyond the world, can separate us from the love of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Not even death, which the world sees as the ultimate ending of everything, not even death can separate us from his love. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

We are called to tell the world to stop looking for the living among the dead. Though everything around us may fade away and die, the life and the love of Jesus never fades away and it never dies, for the Lord is Risen indeed!