

Seeking Life Among the Dead

Luke 24:1-12; Acts 10:34-43

The Resurrection of Our Lord - March 27, 2016

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams



[SLIDE 31] We are gathered this morning to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, but our appointed gospel lesson tells us nothing about the actual resurrection of Jesus. Whatever happened to Jesus in between sunset Friday and sunrise Sunday, happened in the darkness of the tomb, perfumed with the scents of damp stone and earth. It happened where no one but Jesus could talk about it, and as far as we know he never did.¹

When the earliest followers of Jesus talked about the resurrection, they didn't try to explain what happened

to Jesus. Instead they told stories like the one we hear this morning — a story in which Jesus does not even make an appearance. That is the problem and the point of the story — Jesus is not where he is supposed to be.

His women followers saw him crucified, and hastily buried in a rock-hewn tomb. Because the Sabbath was quickly approaching Jesus' broken body was wrapped in a linen cloth without any of the proper rituals. But the women paid careful attention to where the tomb was and how the body was laid within in it (Luke 23:55). They went back to their lodgings and gathered the spices and ointments traditionally used to prepare a body for burial, and waited all through the Sabbath — all through Friday night, all day Saturday and all through the night that was already the first day of the week. Finally, at dawn they went to the tomb with their spices and ointments to lovingly serve Jesus in death even as they had served him in life. When they arrived they found the stone rolled away from the tomb's entrance. What they did **not** find, however, was Jesus. His body was not where it had been laid on Friday evening. They were bewildered and perplexed. Nothing in their experience had prepared them for this. Neither then, nor now do dead men quite get up and walk out of their tombs. The women draw a complete and total blank. Ah ... what now?

Only to be confronted by two men, whom we learn later are angels, asking them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has been raised." In other words, "you are looking for Jesus in the wrong place. He is not dead, but alive. Remember ... he told you this would happen." And the women remembered Jesus' words — words that when Jesus first spoke them were too strange, too weird, too incredible to make any sense. Now, faced with an empty tomb and an angelic duo telling them to remember Jesus's words, the pieces fall into place. The

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Learning to Wait in the Dark" available at www.huffingtonpost.com/barbara-brown-taylor/learning-to-wait-in-the-dark_b_5175191.html.

women race off to share their experience with the male disciples, only to have their story dismissed as delirious nonsense. Peter alone goes to investigate, and finding the linen cloths lying by themselves, goes home wondering to himself.

For these early Christians the resurrection was about discovering that Jesus was not where they expected him to be. He had died and been buried, but his tomb was empty. They had come prepared for the traditional burial rites, only to discover that those rites were not needed. Jesus had been raised from the dead, and was out and about in the world. Later that day, Jesus shows up as a stranger on the road to Emmaus, accompanying two grieving disciples on their way home. The disciples don't recognize him until he breaks bread with them and vanishes. They run back to Jerusalem where as they are telling their story to the other disciples Jesus shows up in the middle of a locked room. Jesus meets Mary near his tomb, but is mistaken as a gardner until he speaks her name. On another occasion Jesus shows up on a beach, instructs them how to fill with fish, and makes them breakfast. What their stories tell us is that they had to stop looking for the living among the dead. They had to change their expectations because the risen Christ continued to be a living presence in their lives. He kept turning up where they least expected him to be, crossing boundaries, pushing them in directions they would not have chosen if left to their own devices.



We see this in our reading from the book of Acts. It is now a few years after that first Easter. We hear Peter describing this gigantic “aha!” moment that he has just experienced. While waiting for lunch one day, Peter is praying on a rooftop, falls into a trance and sees a large sheet filled with “unclean” - non-kosher — animals. A voice from heaven tells him to help himself, but Peter, a devout Jew, protests that he has never eaten any kind of unclean meat. This vision occurs three times. As Peter is trying to make sense of this, messengers arrive inviting him to the Roman city of Caesarea to the home of an Italian officer named Cornelius. Cornelius is not just any foreigner, he is a representative of a foreign military power occupying Judea, he is a representative of a different religion (albeit friendly and supportive of Jews), he is one of “them,” one of those people who make life for ordinary Judeans difficult and sometimes scary. Yet God directs Peter to Cornelius, and finally the light goes on. He realizes that through this vision God is showing him that no human person is profane or unclean (Acts 10:28) or as he puts it here, “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). God shows no partiality, means that God does not play favorites, and even more importantly God does not recognize ethnic, religious, economic, political, or social boundaries. Jesus Christ really is the Lord of all (10:36). Peter finally came to see that all really means all. Recognizing Christ as the Lord of all means accepting all people without exception for Jesus’ sake. Not only was Peter’s mind and heart towards foreigners an non-Jews changed, but so was the entire focus of the church’s mission.

Two decades later, the apostle Paul wrote that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female (Galatians 3:28). A few years ago, another Christian teacher declared, “there is neither Republican nor Democrat, citizen or undocumented visitor, gay nor straight for all are one in Christ Jesus.² A few days ago, on Maundy Thursday, Pope Francis washed the feet of migrants and asylum seekers from Mali, Eritrea, Syria and Pakistan, declaring that “All of us together, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, Copts, Evangelical [Protestants] [are] brothers and sisters — children of the same God — we want to live in peace, integrated.”³

Easter faith challenges us to ask ourselves: are we seeking the living among the dead? Do our cultures and traditions, ideas and expectations about Jesus prevent us from recognizing the risen Christ, as alive, present and active here and now in our lives and in our world, even when we don't recognize him? Do we see the Risen Christ as the Lord of all who shows no partiality, plays no favorites, and certainly does not respect our ethnic, religious, political, economic, gender or other social prejudices? Do we see the Risen Christ as the Lord of all who joins heaven and earth together? Do we see the Risen Christ, as John Reilly does in this painting projected on the monitors, as the spiritual power binding all of reality into one unified whole? Do we see Christ present within all people, filling the waters, the air and the light which give us life? Will we join him in his mission of bringing heaven to earth, of bringing light and life and love to all people?

Please pray with me:

God of mercy, we no longer look for Jesus among the dead, for he is alive and have become the Lord of all life. Increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ, and help us live together in peace with all your people everywhere, through the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² John C. Holbert, “A Christ for All: Easter Reflections on Acts 10:34-43” available at www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Christ-for-All-John-Holbert-03-30-2012?offset+1&max=1.

³ Elahe Izadi, “Pope Francis washes feet of Muslim migrants, says we are ‘children of the same God,’ March 25, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/03/25/children-of-the-same-god-pope-francis-washes-the-feet-of-muslim-migrants/>