

“Living Among the Dead”

The Resurrection of Our Lord - April 17, 2022 - Luke 24:1-12/C

How many of you out there can honestly say that you’ve had a day go exactly as you had it planned? I mean, for me, the days rarely go the way I had imagined they would. Maybe it’s that drop-in visitor, or the one who needs something now that they hadn’t yet mentioned. Maybe it’s a child who gets sick or a school schedule that changes at the last minute. Maybe your horse pulls up lame or you pull out of your garage and realize you have a flat tire. Lots of stuff happens that sidetracks what you might have had in mind for your day. Right?

But sometimes these occasional interruptions not only change your schedule, but literally change your life. A phone call in the middle of the night, or a police officer at your door. A serious diagnosis out of nowhere or natural disaster that changes the landscape for decades. A close relationship that ends in betrayal, or the realization that what you dreamed, delivered only disappointment. We all know what it feels like to have our lives turned upside down in an instant, in the blink of an eye.

A global pandemic that shuts down your world, and your church community shifts into a cyberspace gathering. An angel that appears in your room and tells you that you are going to bear God’s son. A fall on the road to Damascus blinds you to everything except a call to bring God to the Gentile world. Working all night to produce nothing until Jesus fills your boat with fish or your water jug with wine or heals your body, rids you of demons, restores your soul and saves you for eternal life.

Now we’re ***talking!*** Now we’re thinking on God’s terms and not our own...and it is one of the most scary things we will ever do. Life shifts and can turn on a dime. But, people, not so much. (C’mon, Pastor Susan, God doesn’t work like that any more - at least not in my life, you say.) Really?

The details of today’s story of Easter morning are familiar. Some disciples of Jesus, apparently all women, have just had one of those life-changing moments. But this is not their first time. About three years before today’s events, they each had a moment of clarity that was so true they just had to set everything aside and follow a man from Nazareth, (of all places), a teacher of heart truth, a restorer of bodies and even of souls. Truth like that doesn’t come along every day. But there he was. And there they were. They became believers, and they followed Jesus. And for some of them this was the very first time they were treated as equals, as they learned how to live out the truth that was deep within them.

It was hard - wandering around from village to town - from Galilee and even farther north, all the way to Jerusalem in the south -- but living a life that was not their own was harder. And with Jesus, the relationships alone were enough to make it all worthwhile. Everyone counted. Everyone belonged. And Jesus was the reason their lives were now peppered with miraculous healings, amazing teaching, power over nature and evil, restoration and forgiveness. This made it worth all the sacrifices. This made the cost seem inconsequential. Following Jesus made life worth something far greater than anything they had invested in him.

Then their lives - that had just come together with purpose - began to fall apart again. Jesus was gone, so how could they possibly go on? How could they even ***begin*** to think that they might do the work he had done without ***him***? He had left them, with no instructions, just what they had known before they knew him. So, they went back to their former roles: Go - at the first safe opportunity - and anoint his body as was the custom of the Jews. It was ***mitzvah***. It was a command. These women knew death, and they knew exactly what to expect, what to do and how to do it. They would prepare his earthly remains with great respect and great love.

But instead of finding themselves in Good Friday – these women who came to the tomb found themselves in Easter! The great stone had been rolled away. Perhaps grateful that someone had provided access, they went inside to begin their work. But there was no body! Had he been moved? Did the women miss a message? Where was Jesus, they all wondered (Luke says they were “perplexed,” not afraid,) until two men in dazzling clothing appeared there with them, and asked the question that would launch their third life-changing experience. *“Why do you look for the living among the dead? 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.”* (Oh, yeah...come to think of it, he did say something like that – but we...*didn't believe him - couldn't bear to believe him - couldn't imagine it would actually happen to him.*) But with that reminder, they *did* remember, and went straight to the others to tell *them* what had happened.

Resurrection tends to rearrange everything. Belief systems. Schedules. Friendships. Rituals. Even lives. When the 11 heard the women's story, they had a similar reaction. *“This can't be...couldn't happen...too good to be true.”* But one among them believed enough to get up and run to the tomb. He was not met with angelic messengers - he just saw nothing. But that meant that the news about Jesus was accurate. And Peter had just experienced his own personal moment of truth, like the women, for the third time since he met Jesus.

Why do we keep looking for life in graveyards? What prevents us from seeing the power of God at work in the world, or even in us? Are our hearts hardened like a great stone that needs to be rolled away? Have we ***never*** seen God at work, so that all we feel is the despair of a lifeless tomb in desperate need of some Resurrection hope? Maybe ***you*** are feeling right now that Jesus has left your life, that somehow you have lost God. Maybe you struggle with the unfairness of tragedy as it unfolds right before you. Maybe you know someone who is really, really angry with God, and maybe that someone is you. Well, then, my friends, you have been to the tomb and looked inside. But, stop looking for the living among the dead! Because the Risen Christ is waiting right there ***for you***. No need to feel guilty or fret, folks have failed to recognize the work of God before.

2000 years ago, skeptics claimed that the resurrection was just a story from people who had created a fantasy to cope with their grief. And yet, none of the gospels portray people acting that way. In fact, each of the early believers had their own unique moments of truth – next week we'll hear about Thomas – who couldn't quite grasp the idea until he grabbed on to the living Lord. Most came to believe because they were told by someone who had been at the empty tomb or encountered the risen Jesus himself. Those testimonies have been passed on in a never-ending Alleluia, an unbroken line of faith in the Author of Life - from then to now.

So, what is left of the Easter Morning experience for us today? When you hear the Good News that Jesus is not dead – what does that mean for you? Think back on those who have shared the story of Jesus with you, and remember how you saw God at work in them. Have you ever looked into a tomb and found that it was not as hollow as you thought, but filled with promise of renewal, rebirth and new life?

Author Ched Myers says, *“Here is a possibility we never considered, a prospect too terrible to contemplate. An invitation to follow Jesus – again. To resume the Way, the consequences of which we now know all too well. Suddenly, from deep within us, from that unexplored space underneath our profoundest hopes and fears, roars a tidal wave of trauma, ecstasy and terror all at once. We race out of that tomb as if we had just seen a ghost.”*

So what does Easter mean to us, now? Different things to different lives. Perhaps your answer is, “God raised Jesus from the dead.” Or maybe it's “Jesus saved me from my sins.” What about “It proves that God loves me no matter what” or even “Now I know that I will be raised on the last day and spend eternity in heaven with those who've gone before me.” But today I'd like to suggest something else, something ongoing. Consider this, *“Easter means that Jesus loved you so*

much that he emptied himself into a life such as yours, so that you would know perfect love that survives death - even death on a cross. And now - your life is not fully your own - your life belongs elsewhere." A moment of truth. A moment that could change your life. A moment where new life can leave an empty tomb.

So, Easter blossoms once again. Perhaps you are here today and today only. Maybe you sit here 52 Sundays a year. But no matter how you come today, you are welcome in this place. You are forgiven for your thoughts and deeds, for your poverty of mercy and your sinful, stinging nature. Because at this altar, we are all the same: those with power and those with none; those with wealth and education, and those for whom those gifts mean little; those with health and love and those who yearn for either; those who are dead, and those who need to be fed.

Today, we are called on to give up our power and take on the power of God. Today, we are called on to give up our lives and take on our life in God. That is the essence of Easter. ***This is your day of Resurrection.*** This is your moment of truth. So, rejoice! For even if you have not SEEN the Lord; the Spirit of Jesus Christ - the beloved Son, the Savior of the World, the One who makes **all things** new - is risen today, and living...in you. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church - Olathe, KS.

Resources: "Conversations with God V: Lord, I am Afraid..." Sermon for Lent 5 - 2014; Faith Lens for 4.21.19; Rev. Canon John Thompson-Quartey, Day1.org; Ched Myers in *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?*