

**Easter Sunday,
April 17th, 2022**

Luke 24:1-12 “Looking for the Living Among the Dead”

He is risen! (He is risen indeed). There are a lot of folks who believe that Christmas is the highest holy day on the church calendar. And I can see why this is the case. Christmas gets a lot more attention among the general population. It spills over into what we'd call “secular life. But for centuries Christmas was just a minor feast in the Christian tradition until the pagans in northern Europe helped us turn it into what it is today. The truth is that *Easter* is really our highest holy day, because as important as it is to celebrate God's incarnation on Christmas, we wouldn't be gathered here as a worshipping community today were it not for the resurrection. That's why I often refer to Easter as “Resurrection Day.” This is where we get to confidently proclaim, “He is risen.” (He is risen indeed).

But there's something odd about the resurrection story on the years when Luke is our gospel text. “Oh, Jesse, are you going to pick on Luke again this week?” Kind of. Last week, we discovered that Luke is the only gospel writer who does not mention people waving branches when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time. So last week we had Palm Sunday without palms. But something

is missing in this week's text too. Anybody want to take a guess what's missing this week? Anybody hear the name "Jesus" mentioned in the passage? Me neither. Now I can deal with Palm Sunday without palms, but Easter without Jesus? That's pushing it. Although "no Jesus in the tomb" is kind of the *point* of Easter isn't it? "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen."

Truth be told, John's version of the resurrection is everyone's favorite. It's the only one that shows up in the lectionary every year as one of the choices for gospel readings and it's the one that screen writers use whenever they make movies about Jesus. I use it every year for sunrise service because it has such a big emotional impact, especially when Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and says, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" But when it comes to the other three gospels, I like Luke's resurrection story best even though he never mentions Jesus by name. I like it because he's the only gospel writer that puts an emphasis on the word "remember." When the two men in dazzling clothes stood before Mary Magdalene and the other women gathered at the tomb they said, "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.'

Then they *remembered* his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.”

Here’s something that not a lot of church traditions emphasize, but it’s in all four gospels. The women at the tomb were the first ones to bear witness to Christ’s resurrection. In other words, they were the first evangelists. They were the first preachers. Women! And yet some churches go out of their way to shine a spotlight on two or three obscure, out-of-context passages in the epistles to “prove” women shouldn’t be preachers. And yet the main characters in all four stories of the resurrection are women. Here’s something about Luke’s story that I appreciate. Luke writes, “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. *But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.* But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.”

These women who were the first to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ resurrection ventured out to tell his inner circle of 11 apostles what they had witnessed. And how did these men respond? “Pffff ... yeah right.” The women’s words “seemed to them an idle tale.” At least Peter had the decency to go look for himself. But even

still, his reaction was, “Wow! I guess those women *were* right. Imagine that!” Here's what I want to know: *Why* did Peter think this was so amazing? This good news had long been predicted. It's not like none of them knew about this already or that it was a big surprise! Jesus *repeatedly* told the twelve that this was going to happen. Was it *that* hard for them to believe the impossibly extravagant love and grace of God that is embodied in the resurrected Christ? It's something that they knew about. It's something they heard. But they just couldn't see it unfolding around them. Their first reaction to the news was that it was an idle tale. Which leads me to wonder, “Was it because it was too much to believe? Or was it because the women told them?” I'll leave that for you to ponder. What I want to focus on today is this idea of remembrance.

The men in dazzling clothes who met the women at the tomb had to tell them to “*remember.*” Then when the women told the apostles what they saw, it was apparent that the apostles didn't remember either. We sometimes forget how remembering is such an essential part of our faith. One of our primary tasks is to remember. We're supposed to remember *who* we are and *whose* we are. Throughout the history of God's people, we see this back-and-forth exchange between God remembering us and we as God's people remembering God. In Genesis, God remembers Noah. God remembers Abram and Lot. God

remembers the Israelites. But then the Israelites in Judges did not remember God. God remembers Hannah. The Psalmist remembers God over and over. In Isaiah, God reminds people to remember whose they are. Jonah, bless his heart, remembers God even as he was trying to run away from God. Here's one that's important in our tradition: What does Jesus say to his disciples at the last supper? "When you do this, remember me." And then at the moment of crucifixion when Jesus was about to breathe his last breath, the thief on the cross next to Jesus says, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Remembrance is a powerful thing, but we have trouble with this. Here's something to consider: We think the opposite of "remember" is "forget." But linguistically speaking, the opposite of remember is "dismember." To "dismember" means to take a body apart. "Remember" means to gather things that we've seen and heard to put them back together. Jesus was dismembered on the cross, but he is remembered every time we break bread ... every time when we remember his words. In other words, Jesus' body is put back together again when we remember him at this table. This is where we share forgiveness. This is where we share his teachings. This is where we are equipped to carry on his ministry. This is what Easter communion is all about. Jesus was dismembered on Friday but he is remembered today. The apostle Paul

often compared the church to a body. In fact, he calls the church “the body of Christ.” When we break this bread together, we are putting Jesus’ body back together. How’s that for a paradox?

Then there’s this question, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” This gets me every time. It’s such a powerful question. When you’re looking for resurrection, you don’t find resurrection in a cemetery. The way we understand the world is that dead people should stay dead. Here are these women looking for Jesus in this cemetery and these men in dazzling clothes ask, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Fair question. Jesus told his followers again and again, especially in Luke’s gospel, that he would die and rise again. The women and the apostles had to be reminded. He’s not here, he is risen. They all had to move forward and think beyond their understanding of where Jesus may be or should be.

We in the church are like this too. We operate only in the way we understand the world. And this comes out most when we insist that we do things the same way we’ve always done them even when they no longer serve a purpose. We’re struggling with this right now in our hopefully almost post-pandemic world. There’s a longing to return to the way things were and yet, during and after this pandemic, that’s just not possible. There’s no going

back to *exactly* the way things were. “Yeah, but you just talked about the importance of remembering things! We remember how things used to be before the pandemic, so doesn’t it stand to reason that we want some of these things back?” It does.

I was listening to a podcast last week where the host told a story of this Lutheran Church up in Great Lakes, Michigan who was having a hard time letting go of things. Out of the blue, they decided to resurrect an 8:00 German speaking service that had faded away over the years, not because they had an influx of German-speaking immigrants or anything, but because they had this interim minister and two or three people who spoke German. So the people said, “Hey! We used to have an 8:00 service in German! We’ve got a German speaking minister! Wouldn’t it be a great idea if we could have this again?” No! It would *not* be a great idea. That service was for a particular time and place and there’s a reason it ended. I think people in that church mis-used the “r-word” when they made this decision. “Hey, we ought to *resurrect* that 8:00 German-speaking service!” But is that *really* resurrection? It sounds like they wanted to bring something back to life and have it be the same as it was before. Which sounds a lot more like Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* than it does Easter. The church often keeps things on life support just for the sake of keeping them going. We focus our efforts on looking to things that are

dying or have already died. And, hey, maybe the reason we don't want some things to die is because we don't know how to let go of them and grieve. But Easter teaches us that unless something dies, it can't be resurrected. That's hard for us to get our heads wrapped around individually and communally. Sometimes we need to allow things in the church and in our own lives to die. Old traditions, old dogmas, and old prejudices need to die. And we need to accept that not everything gets resurrected. And resurrection isn't just repeating ... it's not cloning what used to be. Resurrection is new life *transformed*. Through death there comes something new. We see this in so many post-resurrection stories when Jesus appears to others. They don't recognize him at first because even though Jesus is resurrected, he's *not* the same. Sure, he's got scars, but he's not a carbon copy or a clone of his old self. He's something different.

Resurrection is not a return to what was, it's an invitation to that which will be. Have we experienced resurrection in the church? Have we experienced resurrection in our own individual lives? Don't look for the living among the dead. Instead, venture forth in the new thing God is doing among us. He is risen. (He is risen indeed).