

Living Among the Dead

A sermon on Luke 24:1-12

As Sue was trying to sell me on planning the sunrise service last year, she talked about how beautiful the cemetery is on East Sunday morning. She told me about how the Sun comes up behind the trees and the quiet morning turns glorious as we celebrate the Resurrection. Now, you don't have to sell me on preaching and planning worship, nor do you have to sell me on hanging out in graveyards. We spend far too much time avoiding the dead in our world. It makes sense to me, then, that if you have a beautiful cemetery that the Sun rises over on Easter Sunday morning, of course you'd welcome in the Resurrection there.

Still, it is an odd thing that we do, isn't it? The angels, the two men in dazzling white, say to the women who have come to the tomb, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Why is it that we look for Jesus in this place, this place that reminds us that, at least for now, death wins? Because believe me, friends, these graves are full. They are full of bodies who lived long lives and lives cut short, lives filled with joy and lives filled with suffering, but they are full of bodies all the same. Bodies decaying and bodies decayed. Bodies that are not much more than dust. And yet we gather here, in this place of death, to look for the living.

Maybe we do it to remember those who we hope to see alive in Christ. We have all lost people. We have all dealt with the grief that comes from having someone at your side one day and the next day gone. Loss is such a tragedy that we have to find hope somewhere and for many of us, we find that hope in Christ's resurrection. After all, Paul promises us that the last enemy defeated is death, which means that on that great getting up day, death will no longer separate us from those that we care about.

Or maybe we do it because, as Christians, we have gotten very good at looking for any sign of life even when we're surrounded by death. We are hopeful people and we cling to what we've been given. We smile at dandelions in sidewalks, at the desert bloom, at a golden cross left standing when all else has burned. We know how to seek out the signs of life amidst devastation. We know how to find hope.

But this makes us people who are often doing exactly what the women at the tomb do in our story. We look for the living among the dead. We come to cemeteries in search of Jesus when angels and saints across the centuries have told us that he is not here. He is risen! Christ is alive and walking this earth today. The question is, where do we find him?

Well, surely he is found in our hope, in our sparks of life amidst devastation. After a season of Lent like we've had, after a few weeks of Good Fridays and no Easter, surely Jesus is found in whatever sparks of life we see. But life is not limited to cracks in the sidewalk or miracles in the desert or crosses in ruins of churches. There are places in this world where God is bringing abundant new life and those are the places to which the angels point us. We humans, we will look for the smallest shred of hope in a tomb and miss the fact that it's empty. When new life comes, it comes in unexpected places. New life is just that: new. New and surprising and unexpected and difficult to understand, but new life all the same.

Jo Schonewolf, preached at Salem UMC (sunrise), 04-21-19

When Jesus rises, he leaves the tomb.

And so should we.

In this season of Easter, as we celebrate the new life within ourselves that we have been longing for all of Lent, it's time for us to start looking at all of the places where Jesus is alive and well. It's time for us to leave the tomb. Because the new life Jesus brings will be unexpected, but it will be vibrant. You'll be able to see it in new feeding ministries that spring up in the face of a remodel. You'll be able to see it in programs that work to get all the unhoused into a home. You'll see it in hospital visits and in prisons, at the border and in the city, at baby showers and yes, in cemeteries, because the new life that Jesus brings is always for the people that we have left out. Jesus is always with those that we close our minds, our hearts, and our doors to.

So this Easter, as we do all the things we've always done and observe all the traditions and duties we've been taught to observe, let's be like the women at the tomb. Let us approach with sorrow the places where we think Jesus has left us bereft and let us heed the words of the angels. Let us look for the living among the dead no longer and let us go out and find Jesus, wherever he is.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.