

Luke 24:1-12

¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But 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.

I grew up Jewish and remember our High Holy Days, Rosh Hashona and Yom Kippur. Easter is the central celebration of the year for Christians. It is our High Holy Day. It begins the celebration of the resurrection, which is the church’s reason for being. In all kinds of churches, tall steeple, mega, mini, Catholic, Protestant, and non-denominational, “He is risen, he is risen indeed!” rings out.

Churches with so many differences have the same starting point. For our Orthodox brothers and sisters, Easter will be celebrated next week.

Another thing most churches have in common is a pastor that has stressed all week over, “What do I need to do to reach all these people so that the guests come back next week?” One other thing they have in common is that they know the Sunday after Easter is called “low Sunday”, just like the Sunday after Christmas. On these days, we have the Sundays with the smallest attendance of the year.

I learned early on not to worry about that and just to celebrate the joy of a well-attended service and the happiness of the people gathered. That’s a good thing, because in my 45 years as an ordained pastor, this is one sure and certain truth about the church. So, having said all that, I am glad you are here and remind you, you are always welcome!

Members and guests know pretty much what to expect from our service today. We will focus on our belief that Jesus was raised and is alive among us. We will tell the story of the first Easter morning with women going to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body. We will also pray and sing and celebrate communion.

So, some women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body. Just who are these women? They are women who have followed Jesus all along. At least a few of them were wealthy enough to have supported his ministry throughout his time of preaching, teaching, and healing. They traveled with him, thinking he spoke the truth and talked of a new reality and life based on sacrificial love. The authorities, motivated by fear, shut him up by killing him. He was executed by the Romans as a rabble-rousing revolutionary, while his followers had seen him as the Prince of Peace. All they could do was look on at his execution, watching his brutal torture and death. They continued to look on as he was laid in the tomb.

These faithful women had been traumatized by what they had just experienced. The one they loved, who loved them, had been violently and viciously executed. They had bet their lives on him, and now they feel they have lost everything. Yet they get up early that first Easter morning to do their duty, to prepare the body for permanent burial. Despite everything they experienced, they got up, put one foot in front of the other, and slogged onward to the tomb. They did what they had to do, as difficult as that was. It was their duty. They arrived, and to make matters worse, now, the body is gone. They can't even do their duty; more trauma is heaped on the trauma they had experienced. All they had to keep them going was their funeral duties, and now even that had been taken from them. How will they keep going?

Then two men appear and ask them the question for the ages. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" I am sure this question doesn't register with the shock and numbness they are feeling. It makes no sense. Then the men continue and tell them he is not here. He has risen! It reminds me of that old song "Lookin' for Love in all the Wrong Places." You can't find the living among the dead.

The men tell them they were looking for the one they loved in the wrong place. They still don't get it. They know two things are certain, death and taxes, and the Romans were good at both. So, what in the world could the men be talking about? This question had to sink in as it does with us. Why do we seek the living among the dead? The message is that Jesus is alive, God has raised him, and death could not hold him. As the gospel song goes, "Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down", and they couldn't get this. It's hard for us, too. What moved these women from incomprehension to comprehension? It was a conversation. These two men asked the women to remember what Jesus had told them; this was what would happen. "Remember his words to you," the messenger said. So, they started putting his words together, and they began to get it. It dawned on them as they listened to the messengers that early Easter morning. "Jesus told us this would happen!" They trusted the messengers that were later called angels. But the difficulty wasn't over. There was still more disappointment and trauma to come.

They had to go back and tell the disciples and the others gathered what had happened. They believed the men and became messengers themselves. They raced back to the disciples in excitement, but their message was not received. They were summarily dismissed as delusional women. Their experience was totally discounted. If you have gone through this, you know how humiliating it can be to have what you say totally dismissed and to be treated like you are making no sense. The women trusted the angels who gave them the message, but then the men, the apostles, and those gathered with them rejected these women's message of good news. These women, the first apostles to declare Jesus is risen (for apostle means sent one), are sent to the ones traditionally called the apostles. And these men dismissed the women and ignored their testimony. So, these first apostles of the risen Christ, the women, were discounted by those who could not believe women's words.

Women's testimony was not considered valid in many Jewish and Roman circles. It was so discounted that one of the early criticisms of Christianity in about 175 AD is that it was started by "babbling hysterical women."

The women were summarily dismissed by all but Peter. And that's as it should be, because I am sure the words of Jesus that he would be arrested, tortured, killed, and rise sounded familiar to Peter. When Jesus told Peter that was what the future held, Peter rebuked him and said NEVER. So, Jesus had to reprimand Peter and tell him, "Don't deny me; be my destiny." Peter, who ran away when Jesus was captured, remembers all

too well. And instead of running away, he runs to the tomb to see if it could be true. His discovery amazes him. The women were right! The tomb was empty. It prepares him so he will be ready when encountering the risen Christ.

And here today's story ends. It's not the whole story. That's as it should be, because Easter is not one and done, but a continuing and growing reality. We are in the Easter season as stories of the encounters with the risen Christ continue to occur.

The question that comes to me from this first installment of the Easter story is, "Why do you seek the living amongst the dead?"

Why do you seek the promises of life amongst the forces of death? But, as I said, Easter is not one and done. The very people who dismiss the women will later say, "I have seen the Lord; he is alive."

I would like to point to some places where life abounds and ask you to open yourself to the possibility that Jesus is there. We experience the miracles of life, both lifelong and momentary. It is found:

In things from a hug to the birth of a child.

In support of friends when you need them.

In an excessive second chance.

In words that inspire you to live beyond yourself.

It's there in art.

When you love your job.

When we experience unexpected joy.

When disdain gives way to respect.

It is there when justice for the oppressed abounds.

When people listen,

When love beats hate,

When evil flees,

When we discover there is more to life than the 24-hour news cycle.

When a message arrives out of the blue from an old friend.

When there is a healing of all kinds of illnesses and wounds.

When peace comes, racism runs away, barriers are broken down, and love wins.

When life as drudgery gives way to happiness.

When we examine and overcome our own prejudices.

When hostility to the poor and the immigrant is replaced by affirmation and meaningful action.

When there is a thoughtful conversation amongst people of a different view.

When you hear that one song.

When you experience trust.

In the love of a companion animal.

When you are surrounded by close friends and family who are positive.

When negativity is banished,

Where trust overcomes doubt,

Where the power of love triumphs over the love of power.

Where faith, hope, and love abound.

When you experience the presence of God in these things and more.

When you are choosing life over death and meeting the living Jesus.
These are Easter moments.

The empty tomb opens us to the possibility of God's living presence in the person of Jesus active in our lives. That is what I want for you this day. I want you to be open to seeing the presence of the promise, of the possibility of God alive and active in the things I just mentioned. And I want you to add other items to the list. God is present in those things that affirm life in the face of death.