

“Looking For Life In All the Wrong Places”

Luke 24:1-12

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Every so often, the astronomy world goes abuzz when some new probe starts beaming back pictures of the surface of Mars, the so-called “red planet,” pictures which seem to present compelling evidence of ancient moisture in the planet’s soil, pictures which give rise to speculation that there may indeed have been life on a planet formerly thought to be dead. This moisture, so it is thought, could have sustained life, who knows when, how much, or what kind, but life in some form. It is always exciting news, but with all due respect to the fine minds at the National Aeronautical and Space Administration, they are, to paraphrase an old country music song, looking for life in all the wrong places. There’s plenty of life down here on earth and much of it is in need of care and feeding.

NASA however, is not altogether different than even the most faithful among us. After they came to the tomb and found that the body of Jesus was not there, the women who came with spices found themselves face to face with two men in “dazzling clothes,” two men who challenge the object of their exploration and make one of the most profound statements in the entire Bible: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” Let us not fault the women too harshly. After all, they themselves had seen the tomb in which the kindly and radical Joseph of Arimathea had laid Jesus and they had even seen

Jesus' body itself placed within the tomb. Respecting custom, they went home, prepared spices, and rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment. What reason might they have had to look elsewhere for the body of Jesus come the early dawn of the first day of the week?

So they return to pay their respects and to anoint the body of their friend and are confronted with a very troubling situation. No Jesus! A tomb yes, but no body. And we might imagine them going through the scenarios that skeptics of the resurrection have reviewed for centuries: maybe he was never really dead, maybe the disciples took his body, and so on. And then appear the two men in dazzling clothes, those some would call angels, who give them the good news of the day, the good news we have come here today to hear once again, that Jesus Christ has risen.

There's an irony in what the women did when approached by the angels. Luke tells us that they "were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground," and with good reason, for heavenly messengers were fearsome creatures. The irony is that just when they should have been looking up, they looked down. As the Psalmist wrote, "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens." And the angels' reply picks up on that irony: "He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." It's not a question, it's

a statement. It's not "Do you remember?" but "You must remember." You see, if they had remembered what Jesus had said, they never would have come to the tomb, but would have been seeking the living Jesus among the living, not among the dead.

This is not remembering in the sense of going through old scrapbooks and reminiscing about the "good old days back in Galilee." This is "remember" in the sense of putting together the pieces of the puzzle to see that God keeps God's promises. More than once, in fact at least three specific times, and with a lot of other hints thrown in, Jesus has told his followers what would become of him. And so after they are reminded, the women get it and that's why it says that the women "remembered his words" and set off to help everyone else remember, even though Peter too goes in search of the living among the dead.

Putting the pieces together to see that God keeps God's promises is why we gather each Easter Day. When we gather to remember the victory of this day, we rejoice that Jesus lives and promises us life, abundant life in the here and now and eternal life in ways we cannot begin to comprehend. When we gather to remember the victory of this day, we begin to understand that God has a purpose and a vision for us. When we gather to remember the victory of this day, we share with one another the life God has given each of us. When we gather to remember the victory of this day, we hold firm to the promises God makes, promises that death

does not have the last word, promises that God binds up the broken hearted, promises that God gives power to the faint and strengths the powerless.

And so the angelic charge to remember, to put together the pieces of the Easter story is the charge to look for life in all the *right* places, to look for the living among the living. But where should we search for life? What are the right places? For one thing, let's not look where we know death hangs out. Just as the women went to the tomb because that's where you put the dead, we'll find death if we go to where death is commonly found. Where is death? In the bottom of a liquor bottle. At a downtown casino. On a porn site. In the processed foods we ingest into our bodies. In working too much and sleeping too little and giving ourselves away on the cheap or for free. In all the places Madison Avenue tells you there's abundant life, you'll find death aplenty. We're not going to find life in money, politics, war, the latest technology, the stock market, or anywhere else in all creation, including Mars. That's looking for the living among the dead.

If we look for life where death is to be found, all we'll find is death. But if we look for life in the only place it really can be found, in the resurrected body of Jesus Christ, in the body of Christ which is the Church, then we'll find it even in those places where all there is is death. Let me say that again: if we look for life in the only place it really can be found, in the resurrected body of Jesus Christ, in the body of Christ which is the Church, then we'll find it even in those places

where all there is is death. That's how we get through the loss of a job. That's how we persevere through that third regimen of chemotherapy. That's how we survive the breakup of a marriage. That's how we recover from addiction. That's how we cope when a child suffers. That's how we manage when someone we love dies.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's victory over death, the last enemy of life, as the Apostle Paul reminds us. Life is what God created us for, abundant life is what God gave us Jesus for. Life is to be cherished and enjoyed. When people ask me if I'm afraid to die, I like to say that I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be dead! Life is just too great. But if I seek that life in places of death, I'll lose the life I cherish. The only way I'll really have life is if I look for the living among the living. May God help me, and all of us, to do just that.

Amen.