



SERMONS THAT WORK

The Great Vigil of Easter

The Angels' Question

[RCL]: Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; Psalm 114; Romans 6:3-11; Luke 24:1-12

On the first Easter, very early in the morning, the women come to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body. They find the stone rolled away so they enter the tomb, but they do not find Jesus' body. Two angels in clothes that gleamed like lightning appear and the women bow down in fear, looking at the ground. Then the angels ask, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

That's a good question. Of course, it was a good question in the context of the story of the women going to the tomb on that first Easter. It's still a good question for us this Easter, living some 2,000 years later. Why do you look for the living among the dead?

For the women, this must have been a surprising question. Think about it. They had gone to the tomb to attend to Jesus' body. They had served their Lord during his earthly life. Now they would do one last act of service for Jesus. They had witnessed his death. They knew that there was no time for a proper burial. So, they came with spices to complete the burial rites. Their beloved Lord was dead. They could at least perform this one last act of love for him. But their hearts must have been heavy.

They must have thought their life with their Lord was over. His call to follow had been irresistible. Serving him was like no other service they had known. It was perfect freedom. But now he lay lifeless in a tomb. They had known perfect love in Jesus, and the world had killed him. The world can be a cruel and fearsome place. Well, they may have thought, at least they would have their memories of the past.

But something amazing happens when they reach the tomb. When they arrive at the tomb, they enter into the place of their deepest and darkest fears. They enter the very place of death. And, yet, what do they find when they enter this place of fear and death? Nothing. No body. No thing. Nothing.

We are told that they were perplexed when they did not find the body, which is understandable. They thought their life with Jesus was over and his dead body was the final coda. But the angels tell them that this is not the end of the story. They say, "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."

Wow! Astounding, overwhelming, world-turning news! A total change of orientation. Why are you looking for the living among the dead? That was then, this is now, and now there is new life, resurrection life ahead. They hear the good news that Christ is risen from the dead, and they need to change from people who perform burial rites for the dead to apostles who bear witness to the living Lord. They need to stop living in the past and start living in the future. They need to change from people who are bent over with fear, staring at the ground, to people who stand up, go forth, and boldly proclaim that God's life is stronger than any death, that God's love is stronger than any hate, that God's peace is more powerful than human violence, that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and is alive.

Why are you looking for the living among the dead?

The good news of Easter is that Jesus Christ, who was crucified, has been raised from the dead. This belief, this truth, this resurrection changes everything. Cruelty is not the last word. Sin and evil are not the ultimate powers of the universe. Death does not get the final laugh. Forgiveness and love and life are the final realities of the world. The power of God is stronger than any tomb. Jesus Christ is risen today.

And the good news of Easter is not only that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and lives, but also that the power of the resurrection can transform our lives as well. New life is possible, here, now, today. We can stop looking for the living among the dead. We can live new lives, here and now, by the power of the resurrection. The promise of Easter is that we can. We don't need to go about looking for the dead among the living and we don't need to go about like the living-dead.

But it's not easy, is it? We rather like living in the past. It is comfortable. It's what we're used to. Here's how a distinguished, older preacher, Edmund Steimle, put it, commenting on the text, "God's mercies are new every morning." He said, "At my age, this promise of newness every morning is at best a mixed blessing. I have come to the point in life when I really don't want anything new in the morning. I want my slippers right beneath my bed where I left them the night before. I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast, as normal. In my advanced years, I can do without a lot of newness, especially in the morning."

Okay, I get it, we get it, we have all probably felt that way ourselves at some point. But that's not really what the promise of Easter is about. The promise of Easter is that we don't have to look for the living among the dead. And if we are honest with ourselves, I expect we will recognize this tendency in our human nature. Even when the past is no longer life-giving, we seem to keep going back to it, thinking that maybe this time, we will find something there. But, the truth of the matter is that when we do so, we find the same old crummy, life-denying relationships and patterns of behavior. Same old compulsions, same old angers, same old anxieties, same old fears. Even so, it is such a powerful myth that for a myriad of reasons, some saner than others, we keep going back to the past, we keep looking for the living among the dead.

Why do we keep going back to the myth that says things were better in the past? You know the myth of the past where our children were better behaved; our families were all straight out of Norman Rockwell; our churches were all devout and holy. The myth says, if we could just get back to that past somehow, somehow, then everything would be better.

It's a powerful myth. Lots of people are looking for the living among the dead. But it is a different reality than the one proclaimed on that first Easter because the truth of the resurrection is that we are to live new lives, here and now, by the power of the future. That is, we are to find our true life meeting us from the future, somewhere in our own walk to Emmaus, not buried among the past or in any tomb. This truth terrified the women on that first Easter. Let go of the past and start living in the future. It may terrify us too. But just because we are terrified, doesn't mean it isn't true.

The women eventually got over their terror and started living the resurrection in their lives. We can too. We can stop looking for the living among the dead. The good news of Easter is that it is not just about Jesus but also about us. Jesus is alive and has gone ahead to prepare a way for us, and because of this, we can also claim our new life here and now, and move confidently into the future. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is literally true that our best days are ahead of us because the future is where our risen Lord is and where he promises to meet us, even now. And this is good news.

Now, what we do with this good news is up to us. We can ponder it. We can fret about it. Or we can accept it in faith and make it our own. Right here, right now, we can stop worrying about yesterday, we can stop looking for the living among the dead. We can claim the new lease on life that is given to us in the risen Christ, we can claim our second chance, we can forgive what is past, and we can get on with living the abundant life our risen Lord promises to us.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. He is alive. He has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us. He promises to meet us there.

Why do we keep looking for the living among the dead?

Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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