

Luke 24:4-8.

⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ” ⁸ Then they remembered his words.

Ironies of the Passion: Why Do You Look for the Living Among the Dead?

Every once in a while we all get lost. Even in this age of internet maps and GPS and turn by turn direction we still get lost every once in a while, and sometimes we end up in the completely opposite place that we want to be. You were sure that you parked in the south lot, but you actually parked in the north lot. When you are on a trip and looking for a friend’s house or a relative’s home, somehow you end up on the completely opposite end of town. You thought you knew where you were going in the mall, where the store was in the Mall of America, but you ended up on the wrong floor on the wrong side and the wrong wing of that massive place. Or maybe you are in the cities or in St. Cloud and you are going to visit a friend who is sick and you get completely turned around in a complicated maze of halls and elevators that is one of those big hospitals. I remember as a young pastor being so turned around in a hospital that I found myself staring at the door of the morgue, thinking, this is the exact opposite place of where I want and need to be. This morning, in God’s Word, we see a group of women looking for Jesus in the place that was the exact opposite place of where he would have been and so they hear the angel asking them, **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”**

Of course, you know the story. These women weren’t so much confused or turned around as they were just logically following the directions that others had given them. They went to the last place anyone had seen Jesus: the tomb where Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had laid his body just before sundown on Friday. When we hear the angel’s question, **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”** in a way, the natural answer for the women might have been, *“Well, where else would he be?”*

These women had gotten up early that morning because in love they didn’t want to leave Jesus’ body in the tomb without the proper burial preparations, according to the custom of the day. On the way there, they talked about practical things that they expected to encounter such as the problem of getting into a tomb that was sealed by a large stone. However, when they got there, nothing was the way they thought it would be. The Roman guards Pilate had posted were gone. The stone had been removed, and inside they found grave clothes that were empty, and a cloth neatly folded where his head had been. That’s when two men in shining robes—two angels—appeared and said, **“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!”**

The angel delivers the very message that we celebrate this morning. He has risen. Christ is risen! And yet did you catch the first phrase. Before that wonderful declaration of the resurrection, the angel actually issued a rebuke. These women, were really in the last place, that they should have been. They should have known better than to come to the tomb looking for a dead Jesus. They should've known he would be alive on that third day. Jesus had prepared them for this moment as well as anyone could have. Again and again, going all the way back to Galilee, he had told his disciples that he was going to die and then rise, but they never understood what he was talking about. They failed to grasp the simple sense of his words. They kept trying to make them into a play on words or perhaps a parable. The angel was asking these women why they didn't understand and believe what Jesus had promised.

Jesus had told them, prepared them, given them perfect directions and instructions and still they went the wrong way, still they didn't understand. As, sinners, who also fail to grasp or follow God's perfectly, we can understand why it was so difficult for the women to grasp Jesus directions and instruction. After all, who comes back from the dead? At this time in history, especially, life was cheap. Almost half of all children died before they reached adulthood. Fevers and infections that are easily cured with a prescription from the doctor killed people back then. These women had probably done this kind of duty before for a number of people who were close to them. They fully expected that they would go to the tomb, find the body where it had been laid, and then carry out their labor of love. Never had any of those other bodies been living again three days after they died.

And yet in this case, they should have known better. Not only had Jesus told them, but he had shown them. Just weeks before, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had raised other people too. These women knew that. And the point of those miracles was to show that Jesus had power over life and death. The angels reminded them, *“Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’”* They should have trusted his promise and looked for a living Jesus with promise-filled hope, but sin and doubt ruled their minds, and they reached the tomb filled with sadness, thinking that Jesus was dead.

We can make all the excuses in the world for these women, but that won't change the fact that their faith wasn't able to cling to God's promises at this horrible moment in their lives. Very likely we can absolutely identify with these women. Like them we love our LORD but our faith is often weak and it struggles to cling to God's promises especially at horrible moments in our life. When we hurt, when life seems impossible, or when death is looking us in the face—our own death or the death of people we love—the natural response for us is simply to try to cope, to power through the pain. It's natural for us to tell ourselves that death is just a part of life. The natural response is for us to wrap ourselves in sorrow and just focus on the practical needs at hand. But by nature we are dead in sin and we have been called to faith must remember that our living Savior offers us more. ***Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen!*** Jesus powers through sin and death and hell and offers us a living hope and joy that overcomes and peace that triumphs over sadness! And yet despite all those wonderful instructions and directions, in our sinful weakness we still ignore Jesus and his Word as we get lost in our sadness and frustration, anger or despair.

The angels owe us the very same rebuke. But remember what they said in the very next

breath: *“He is not here; he has risen!”* In his great love, Jesus did the impossible. He died on the cross and paid for our sin and then rose from the dead. Now death does not win in our lives. All those who trust in Jesus will live with him forever. He forgives our weakness of faith and he strengthens us. Day by day, the power of the resurrection—the gospel—is a living force that changes our hearts. It is the source of strength for our faith, especially on the days when life hurts and death comes.

On that day that I got so turned around in the hospital I finally found an information desk and humbly admitted that I was lost and asked for help, because I couldn't just give up. I had traveled all that way and I had an important visit to make. As the angels rebuked the women, Even though these women were really not where they were supposed to be. The angels message also implied that they couldn't just give up. **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”** They were to look and find the risen Jesus for they had some important visiting to do. To look for this risen living Jesus, for him to come to them and visit with them, would make all the difference in the world, for them and for their faith.

Too often, when our faith is weak, when we're dissatisfied, when we feel guilty and foolish and unproductive, if we don't give up looking for Jesus all together we look for Jesus in all the wrong places. Where are we supposed to find Jesus? Through his word God gives us these detailed instructions: We are to find Jesus in the gospel for that's how he comes to us. We find him as he comes to us in the Word that's preached and taught to us. We find him as he comes to us in our Bibles. We find him as he so graciously comes to us in our baptisms, which washed our sins away and daily renews us as we start each day in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We are to look for the living Jesus in Communion where we receive the actual body and blood of the Lord given into death for us. But as spiritually weak sinners we frequently ignore God's clear instructions. And we may not go to the Word, or pick up our Bibles, or go to church, or speak to our pastors so that they can take us to the word and help us see Jesus. And whether it is because we think it is too hard, or it is because of our own pride or laziness, or whatever the case may be, if we look for Jesus at all we look for Jesus in other more selfish places. We want to find him in our own hearts. We want to find him in our feelings. We feel a need to hear him speak to us in all the little miracles that happen to us day after day.

That isn't where the angel told these women to look and for good reason. By nature, our hearts and spiritually dead in sin. Looking for the Son of God there, imagining that the Holy Spirit will speak to us in our lives and in our hopes and in being true to ourselves, we're looking for the living among the dead. It is unwise and often dangerous. The great irony of the resurrection is that Jesus is not found where people expect him to be. Instead, he's found right where he said he would be: in the gospel. The angels told the women to remember what Jesus had said to them. He told them to remember the gospel: That is where our Savior promised he will come to us. looking for the Son of God there, if we imagine that the Holy Spirit will speak to us in our lives and in our hopes and in being true to ourselves, we're looking for the living among the dead. The great irony of the resurrection is that Jesus is not found where people expect him to be. Instead, he's found right where he said he would be: in the gospel. The angels repeated the message Jesus had been telling his disciples ever since they left Galilee: *“The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be*

raised again.” The Bible tells us that Jesus came—to die and rise again! God’s Word tells us and shows us that His resurrection is God’s proof that Jesus did all that he came to do. Jesus’ resurrection says that he has paid for every sin of every sinner who has ever lived and ever will live. He has paid for your sins and mine. He has covered over all our offenses and weaknesses. He forgives and instructs us and strengthens as we struggle with sins that reflect our weakness and the hurt that torments our hearts. Our living Savior Jesus is there to speak to us, to visit with us, and through this good news of the crucifixion and resurrection he tells us that we are declared innocent and righteous before God. And God promised in his resurrection that death is defeated and we too will rise. Neither sin, nor death, nor hell has any mastery over us and death can no longer hold us.

That’s the powerful gospel that angel pointed to when he said, “Remember what he told you.” Luke then tell us, “***Then they remembered his words.***” Suddenly, it all came flooding back to them. With this simple expression, Luke shows the power of the Holy Spirit to create, strengthen, and clarify faith.

We have his perfect instruction, his wonderful direction, but as sinners we still get lost, we will always have room to grow in our faith. As long as we live here, we will need to grow in our faith and our understanding. It is important to gather together on Easter and all the mini-Easters that is Sunday morning worship as we proclaim and celebrate and are strengthened and encouraged by the good news of the death and resurrection of our Lord. It is important to come to worship not just on Easter Sunday, but throughout the year. And sometimes we will even need to hear the gospel personally and privately. God has called your pastor to show you Jesus to hear your confession and to tell you that you are forgiven in Christ. God has called your pastor to care for you spiritually in the hurt and sorrows of life. The tool that, I as your pastor, have been given is that gospel. And so that’s why I come to the hospital room (even if I may have a hard time finding it), that’s the pastor visits with his people in their homes and in his office, and downstairs in Bible class, that’s why the pastor stands here and speaks to you, giving you the gospel. That gospel is the power of God that makes all the difference in this world. It is the message that brings forth new and vibrant life that pushes up through the cold winter of sin and death and produces beautiful fruit such as comfort and hope and joy. This is our Easter joy and the good news that we gladly proclaim. He lives! He has risen

Today, we celebrate the fact that Jesus’ tomb was empty, that God rolled the stone away, that the women heard the greatest proclamation of all time: He is not here. He has risen just as he said he would. Jesus kept his promise. He is alive. Because he is alive, those who were lost and dead in sin are now through faith in the risen Christ redeemed and saved as all our sins are wiped out and forgotten and we are made children of God. And because Jesus is alive, God promises us that we will live with him forever and these promises are made sure. Because he is alive, we have a new life already here—our life of faith in him. Jesus comes to you through Word and Sacrament and finds us in order to gives you and me life; enjoy that life, see him in the gospel and look forward to the eternal day when you will see your living Savior face to face! He has risen! Amen.