

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
Sunday, April 20, 2025

“Look for the Living”
Luke 24:1-12

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Early on Sunday morning, after seeing Jesus executed by the Roman Empire that Friday, a small group of women gather up the courage to go looking for him. These disciples had followed Jesus; they had heard him teach and watched him heal; they knew that he had made God real and close; they had discovered that he was life-giving.

And so, despite the danger of looking for someone who had been killed by Rome, these women were brave enough to seek him still. What they set out to do—seeking Jesus—that was courageous and faithful; but, as it turns out, they’ve gone looking in the wrong location. *What* they do is amazing; but *where* they do it—well, that’s not quite so clear.

“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The 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?’” (vv. 1-5a).

At first, this sounds like a rather confusing question. “Why are we looking for the living among the dead? Well, we’re not,” they could’ve answered, “we’re looking for the dead among the dead.” No one knew better than these women that Jesus was dead; they’d seen him die, watched his body carried away—and came back as early as possible at the end of the Jewish Sabbath. They’re looking for the dead exactly where the dead are supposed to be.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” the angelic figures ask—then they add: “He is not here, but has risen” (v. 5). The issue isn’t that they’re seeking Jesus; that’s brave and faithful. The question isn’t “why do they seek him?” but “why do they seek him *here*?” A grave, a tomb, a cemetery—this is a place of death, a place of finality; and it turns out, they will not find Christ here.

“Remember how he told you,” the angels say, “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” (v. 6). Notice, the angels don’t minimize the death of Jesus; this is about real death—and real life. They don’t say, “Why do look for the living among the dead; Jesus didn’t really die, it only seemed that way”; nor do they say, “He is not here, but is treasured in our memories.” This is real death and real life—and the confusion is that they are seeking the Living One where there is only death. Yet after hearing the angels’ announcement, these faithful women immediately get the message: they leave the cemetery, leave the tomb, leave this place of death—and run on ahead to meet Christ risen and alive. And in this, they are for us a model of Christian faithfulness.

“Why do *you* look for the living among the dead?” It’s not just a question for those disciples then and there; this is also a question for us here and now, a “challenge to both church and soul” (Stendahl). Many people today are absolutely looking for life in places of death; many of us are on a desperate search for life, for the fullness of life—for flourishing, fulfilling, real *life*...but, like seeking the Risen Christ in a cemetery, we look for life in all the wrong places.

Sometimes, people are looking for life...in their career, in that hamster wheel of career advancement, thinking ‘just one more promotion, one more credential—then I’ll have finally arrived, then I’ll feel fulfilled.’ But of course, that never happens; we never reach the mirage of life-giving career success—and those who get promoted to the top find out that it’s the most lonely and anxious place of all. Looking for life in professional success—is looking for life in a cemetery.

Sometimes, people are looking for life...in ‘financial security,’ whatever that’s supposed to mean, thinking, ‘one more profitable return, one more bump in the market—then I’ll be okay, then I’ll be secure and at peace.’ Of course, that never happens, either; as it turns out, the richer people are, the more they worry about money. And in any case, money never loves us back. Looking for life in wealth—is looking for life in a cemetery.

Sometimes, people are looking for life...in a relationship, expecting a partner or a spouse to *be* everything and solve everything. This is one of the weird myths of our society; I once attended a wedding where the officiant confidently declared to the couple, “now that you are married, you will never again know sorrow.” Wanting a spouse or a partner to meet our every need—that places an impossible demand on them; it’s basically expecting them to be God. Like looking for life in a cemetery, that won’t ever work either.

Sometimes, people are looking for life...in popularity, prestige, reputation, likes—thinking that with only a few more followers (literal or virtual), those feelings of loneliness or dread or emptiness will at last be washed away. But of course, that doesn't work in the end; there is no amount of external praise that can neutralize our internal doubts; sooner or later, the likes die down, the applause stops, and that silence can be a gut punch. Again, it's looking for life in a cemetery.

Now there's nothing wrong with doing well in our careers, or finding a fulfilling relationship, or any of that; in their own way, these things each have their place. The problem is when we start expecting them to be life-giving, when we start expecting these things to be God. There's nothing wrong with a cemetery; you just better not expect it to be more than it is; you had just better not expect it to bring new life. The real fullness of life we're looking for—that can't be found with any other substitute. Looking for life in places of death will simply never work; as St. Augustine once said, “our hearts are restless until they rest in God.”

I think a good indicator of what's really life-giving, of where life can be found—a good indicator is what people ask for when they're dying. No one is more attuned to life than someone who is drawing near to death. In my nearly sixteen years as an ordained minister, I've sat by the bedsides of many people who were dying... And I'll tell you, never once has a dying person said, ‘Reverend, there's a copy of my resume in the drawer; would you mind reading me all the job titles I held?’ No one has ever said, ‘My investment portfolio is on that table; bring it, please; read out my quarterly returns.’

When people are dying, reaching out for life, they say, ‘Reverend, could you read me a psalm? Could you read me the parable of the Good Shepherd? Reverend, could you pray?’ When death is near, people realize that life—real, honest-to-goodness life—is found with God. It's too bad that “the truth the dead know” (Sexton) isn't something we realize sooner—because we spend far, far too much of our lives “look[ing] for the living among the dead.”

One minister writes this: “Why do [we] look for the living among the dead?” [...]. We are just as guilty of [that] fruitless search. We too want to tend the corpses of long dead ideas and ideals. We cling to former visions of ourselves and our churches as if they might come back to life as long as we hold on to them. We grasp our loved ones too tightly, refusing to allow them to change [...]. We choose to stay with what we know in our hearts to be dead, because it is safe [...]. The words of the [angels] are a challenge [...] to move into new life. They are reminders that the Holy One dwells wherever new life bursts forth” (Pittman).

Imagine what might happen in our lives if we stopped looking for the living among the dead. Jesus said he “came that [we] may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Imagine if we started searching for life where life can be found, at its source, with God. Imagine if we stopped chasing after life in all the wrong places, and opened ourselves up to real life, real human flourishing, with the Risen Christ, who is himself life. Today, this Easter, God is calling us out of the cemetery, calling us to walk away from death, to leave death behind—and to seek life where life can be found, with Christ our Risen Lord. Thank God. Amen.