

“Why Do You Look for the Living Among the Dead?”

I drive past one several times a week. It extends west from Oracle Road. It's filled with green grass, mature trees, and what seems like endless rows of stone markers. It's a cemetery. It reminds me of others where I've stood and watched as the body of a loved one was lowered into a hole dug out of the ground. On occasion as I've driven, I've seen a person or two visiting a graveside. At other times, there is a row of cars as people prepare to say a final goodbye. But it's not a place where I would go to have a conversation or to play a game or to eat a meal with a friend. A cemetery is a place for the dead. Yet in the verses for our consideration this Easter morning, we find a group of women essentially at a cemetery, where they hear the surprising question: **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”**

Of course, you know the story. We just read it in today's Gospel. These women weren't stupid or confused. They went to the last place anyone had seen the person they were looking for. They were looking for Jesus in the tomb where Nicodemus and Joseph 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?”** the natural answer is “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. In that time and place, there were no funeral directors to take care of things like that. To their surprise, when they arrived, they found that the stone was rolled away. And inside the tomb they found grave clothes scattered on the ground and a cloth neatly folded where Jesus' head had been—but no body. 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!”**

Don't those words sound like a rebuke? The angel thought these women should have known better than to come to the tomb looking for a dead Jesus. They should've known he would be alive on Easter morning. Jesus had told his disciples repeatedly that he was going to die and then rise, but they never understood what he was talking about.

You and I might be more sympathetic to these women than the angels were. We've been there before. We've been wrong so many times in our lives about so many things, especially spiritual things, that we can totally understand why these women never grasped the promise Jesus made. After all, who comes back from the dead? These women had probably faced death before. They may have carried out this sort of responsibility before for people who were close to them. Never had any of those bodies come to life again. It seems unfair to us to rebuke these women for having the natural reaction to this situation.

But they should have known better. Just weeks earlier, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had raised other people too. These women knew that. Jesus had demonstrated his power over death. The angels reminded the women, **“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 come to the tomb in hope, but sin and doubt ruled their minds, and they reached the tomb thinking Jesus was dead.

The angels rebuked these women because the angels were holy. They had the same perspective God has. They were speaking in God's place. We can make all the excuses in the world for these women, but that won't change the fact that their faith wasn't strong enough to cling to God's promises at this horrible moment in their lives. Why would we want to defend their sinful weakness? Well, that's obvious, isn't it? We identify with these humble women who did love their Lord. Our faith is often weak too. When we hurt, when life seems impossible, 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. 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. We can easily leave Jesus and his promises out of the picture.

The angels owe us the same rebuke the women received. 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 die trusting in Jesus will live with him forever—even if their faith is weak like it was for these women on that first Easter morning. Day by day, the power of the resurrection—the good news of 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.

Jesus is not in the tomb and that makes all the difference in the world! All too often, when our faith is weak, when we're dissatisfied, when we feel guilty and foolish and unproductive, we look for Jesus in all the wrong places. Where are we supposed to find Jesus? We find Jesus in the gospel. We find him in the Word that's preached and taught to us. We find him in our Bibles. We find him in our baptisms, which washed our sins away, and in Holy Communion, where we receive the actual body and blood of the Lord. But that isn't the natural place for sinners to look for him. We want to find him in our own hearts. We look for him in our feelings. We feel a need to hear him speak to us in the events and emotions of our day.

That isn't where the angel told these women to look. He told them to remember what Jesus had said to them. He told them to remember the gospel: Jesus died and rose for them. And he says the same thing to us. My friends, our hearts are corrupt. They are full of sin and false ideas. If we go looking for the Son of God there, 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 at the tomb knew that. So they repeated the message Jesus had been telling his disciples: **“The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.”** If the women and the disciples had understood that message, the weekend of Good Friday through Easter Sunday might have been easier for them to bear, but they didn't understand. They were sinners, just like we are. So when Jesus was crucified, their hearts were broken and they could find no comfort. All they could do was carry on with the concrete tasks at hand—like preparing his body for burial. Jesus' words were still the power of God, but his followers didn't understand them because they wanted Jesus to be something different than what he was. They didn't want to see him as a man who came here to die.

But my friends, that's exactly why Jesus came—to die! He came to die because our hearts are sinful, because we look for Jesus in all the foolish places our sinful hearts tell us to, because God has to drag us, kicking and screaming, as it were, to his Word and sacraments. Jesus died because our faith is weak. He died because all sinful hearts deserve to die and spend eternity in hell. When he died, he paid for every sinful heart—including ours.

On Easter Sunday, Jesus rose! 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. It's God's promise that we don't have any sin left to pay for. Our accounts are now clear. Our record is now clean. That will always be true for us. God does not even hold over our heads the sins that we still struggle with or the failures that still torment our hearts. God calls us perfect because Jesus rose. And God promised in his resurrection that we too will rise. Death cannot hold us anymore. God has crippled death. When Jesus returns, God will kill death and we will live with him forever.

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. We don't have to go to a cemetery to find him. He is alive. Because he is alive, God promises us that all our sins are wiped out and forgotten. Because he is alive, God promises us that we will live with him forever. Because he is alive, we have a new life already here—our life of faith in him. And we look forward to eternal life with him! Amen.

The Text: Luke 24:1-8 (NIV84)

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 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.