

Sunday, April 21, 2019  
Rev. Jessica Paulsen  
FPC, Corning  
Isaiah 65:17-25  
Luke 24:1-12

### God Moves...out of the Empty Tomb

It was finally time. The first rays of the sun were peeking over the horizon and so it was finally time. Time for the women who followed Jesus to go to the tomb where he had been laid, taking the spices they had prepared, and complete his burial by anointing his body with them. For every person who died was to be anointed—their bodily lovingly cleaned and prepared for its final rest. But when Jesus died there hadn't been time to complete the burial rituals. By the time his body was brought down from the cross, claimed by Joseph of Arimathea, and laid in the tomb, the last rays of the sun were disappearing, and the Jewish Sabbath was beginning.

And so, the women waited. They waited through the long hours of the Sabbath until they can see “enough morning rays to release [them] from the require[ments]” of the Sabbath (Shannon Michael Pater, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol. 2*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2014. 346). For with the ending of the Sabbath, it was finally time—time to complete the burial of their teacher, their leader, their friend.

Now, one of the things to be aware of is that completing this task would not have been out of the ordinary for them. Every person who died was anointed and it was always the responsibility of the women. Staying in Jerusalem after his crucifixion, waiting through the Sabbath, so they might finally be able to go and complete this task shows us their dedication and commitment to Jesus. They did not want his body to enter final rest without being anointed. So, as they've done probably many times before, for other family and friends, they head to the tomb.

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Imagine their surprise then, when they arrive at the tomb to find the stone rolled away. Perhaps they looked at each other, as in “well, that’s not right.” But they push on, going into the tomb, and discover that the body of their teacher, their leader and friend, is gone. Just gone. We, who have heard this story so many times, may find it rather easy to say, “okay...so it was empty...that was the point.” But remember, this was all new to the women. This is not how things were supposed to go. They’re already grieving his death and then they discover that his body has just disappeared. Now add to all of this that while they were trying to puzzle out what was going on, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. And we’re told the women are terrified and they bow their faces to the ground.

Pause there for a moment. For we don’t often pause with the women in this moment of terror. As Nancy Claire Pittman writes,

We who are accustomed to this story, who are used to thinking of Jesus as our good buddy, who have tried to make God as knowable and dependable as breakfast cereal, hardly linger at the dreadful silence of these women with their faces in the dirt. Our efforts to tame the holy inure us (make us accustomed) to their fear. (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2009. 351)

So, we pause here a moment, with the women, in their terror, as they wait to find out what is really going on.

And in this pause, we realize something about the way God works in the world—which is in the midst of all that is ordinary. The women are doing something they’ve done before, a ritual that was a part of everyone’s life and in the midst of this ordinary act, God shows them something extraordinary, something beyond anything they might have dreamed. We learn and can acknowledge in this moment, when we pause with the women in their terror, that “God’s

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ways are not our ways. They are beyond human comprehension; they subvert what we expect; they demand the impossible. They are holy precisely because they are not of our own making” (Ibid.).

But it doesn't end there. The next thing we hear is a question from the two men in dazzling clothes, a question found only in the Gospel of Luke, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Ummm...because this is where he is supposed to be. This is where we expected to find him. If I was one of the women at the tomb, that'd be about my response. But the men then say to the women, “Remember how he told you...that the Son of Man must be handed over, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” The women need to be reminded that Jesus had already told them what was going to happen. They needed to be reminded that they would not find Jesus among the dead, nor should they expect to find him there.

How often do we need to ask ourselves the same question? Why do you look for the living among the dead? How often do we try to find new life among things that are already dead? Nancy Claire Pittman puts it this way:

We are just as guilty of such a fruitless search [as the women were]. We to 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, to become bigger, or smarter, or stronger. We choose to stay with what we know in our hearts to be dead, because it is safe, malleable, and so susceptible to burnishing [to being seen as perfect] through private memory. The words of the unworldly messenger are a challenge to stop hanging on to the dead and to move into new life. They are reminders that the Holy One dwells wherever new life bursts forth. (Ibid.)

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Or as Jeff Paschal puts it, “Why do we look for life among deadly bigotries and fatal attractions? Why do we look for life among poisonous cynicism, toxic worry, and unchangeable past mistakes? Why do we as a country look for life among war, torture, capital punishment, and oppression of minorities and the poor?” (*Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol. 2*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2014. 347).

We need to ask ourselves where is it that we are looking for life among the dead? In what areas of our lives are we clinging to what has already passed away? We need to honestly answer that question so we can allow God to bring us to new life—to where God would have us grow and flower and bloom. The women would not be able to find Jesus until they acknowledged they were looking in the wrong place. And the two men helped them remember what they already knew—that Jesus would not be among the dead.

The women found those reminders that helped them remember in and through the teachings that Jesus had offered to them throughout his ministry. The reminders we receive are slightly different but they’re still present. One of them is worship—when we come to hear again the teachings of Jesus. When we hear from the Word of how God loves God’s people. But the reminders for us are found not just in the Word, but also in sacrament.

When we gather around this table, when we remember and remind ourselves of how Jesus in the upper room took, blessed, broke, and gave the bread, we know that our Living Lord, our Resurrected Lord is present. This was how two of his followers ended up recognizing him on the walk to Emmaus. They had no idea who he was as they made the journey with him until he sat at table with them, took, blessed, broke, and gave them the bread. It was then that they recognized their risen Lord. As Joseph Small puts it, “the Lord’s Supper in the church is not a re-creation of the Last Supper, but a celebration of resurrection, a testimony to the living Lord, an

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awareness of the real presence of Christ in the midst of his people” (*Connections, Year C, Vol. 2*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2018. 199). Each time we gather to celebrate this sacrament we are celebrating our risen Lord and reminding ourselves that we will not find the living among the dead. We are celebrating God’s living presence with us, in the moment of the breaking of the bread, yes, but also in every other moment.

We celebrate that when we are sent from worship, and from this table, that God goes with us because Jesus was not found among dead. God goes with us because the grave was conquered.

Friends, it’s finally time. It’s time not to complete the rituals of death—preparing and anointing the body. It’s time to share and rejoice in God’s great and living presence. It’s time to remember what the women found to be true—Jesus died and rose again. It’s time to live our lives as a resurrected people. It’s time to proclaim to the world that the tomb was empty and that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed!

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