

A Sermon for Easter Sunday, Year C
April 8, 2007 ~ Luke 24: 1-10
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Do You Look for the Living Among the Dead?

Why do you look for the living among the dead? That was the question the angels asked the women at the tomb. But that wasn't what they were doing, was it? They came to the tomb expecting to find a body. After all, they'd seen Jesus, with their own eyes, beaten, crucified, and dead. And they saw his body, lifeless and wrapped in linen burial clothes, laid in the tomb. What else were they looking for? What else were they going to find?

What else, indeed? You know, I'm sure those women had heard the stories of those folks whom Jesus had brought back from the dead – the son of a widow from the city of Nain (Luke 7:11-15), the daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus (Luke 8:41-56), and Jesus' own dear friend, Lazarus (John 11:1-41). But even though they had probably heard about these other raisings, for some reason it didn't occur to them that Jesus himself might return from the dead, and I'm not sure why that would be. After all, everything that had taken place over the course of the last few days had been predicted by Jesus. On more than one occasion, Jesus told his followers that he would be betrayed, arrested, executed, and, on the third day, be raised from the dead. And, so far, everything had happened just as Jesus had predicted. So why did they come to the tomb looking for the *dead* among the dead? Why was Jesus' death different from the widow's son, or Jairus' daughter, or Lazarus'? The only answer I can come up with is this: they probably weren't that closely connected, if they were acquainted at all, with those other three people who had died. But Jesus was different. Jesus was their teacher, companion, and friend. And Jesus' death was different. And when tragedy strikes so close to your own heart, it's easy for faith and hope to be so shaken that they cease even to operate at the most basic of levels.

Last Friday evening, after we had come home from our wonderful Good Friday worship service, my daughters and their cousin watched *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson's 2004 movie which recreates, in very realistic and graphic detail, the experiences that Jesus had during the final hours of his life. And even though my girls have seen their fair share of grisly, horror flicks, this movie was different for them, and I think it was because Jesus is different for them. And when the film was over, we stayed up and talked about the things they had seen, while they tried to make some sense of it all. And you could see it in their faces how much the movie had affected them.

So maybe it shouldn't come as such a surprise to me that those women came to the tomb expecting to find a body. But that's not what they found. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

More than perhaps anything else, the discovery of the empty tomb is at the heart of the Christian faith. The resurrection was the "exclamation point" that God put on the life and ministry of Jesus. It was God's response to Jesus' death. By it, God validated the claims that Jesus had made about himself. And through it, God vindicated Jesus' mission of proclaiming the

Good News, not to the religious insiders, but to the poor, the outcast, and the penitent. And so important is the resurrection that Saint Paul would later write: If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, our faith would be baseless, and we would be, of all people, most to be pitied. (1st Corinthians 15:17-19) But every Sunday – and not just on Easter Sunday, but every Sunday – the people of God gather, and proclaim the empty tomb and the Risen Lord.

But even given all this, how often do we spend our time looking for the Risen Jesus in all the wrong places? History has shown us that it wasn't sophisticated theological arguments, or well-crafted liturgies, or even in articulate doctrines and dogmas that convinced the followers of Jesus that he had been raised. Rather, it was through personal encounters with the Risen Lord. In those first days, weeks, and even years, following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Risen Lord was encountered by a variety of people, and under a variety of circumstances.

Those women who came to the tomb that first Easter morning, wracked with grief and sorrow over the loss of such a close and dear friend, encountered the Risen Lord, and he gave them joy. The disciples who had gathered together in fear, hiding from the religious authorities, encountered the Risen Lord, and he gave them peace. Two perplexed and disappointed followers of Jesus, walking along the road to Emmaus, and trying to figure out where everything had gone wrong, encountered the Risen Lord, and he gave them encouragement. The disciple, Thomas, was having a very hard time believing the testimony of the other disciples and the women, when he had an encounter with the Risen Lord, and he was given assurance. Even Saint Paul, who's job *had been* to arrest Christians and bring them before a religious court for trial, was traveling to Damascus when he encountered the Risen Lord, and he was given a new life.

And even though these encounters took place nearly two thousand years ago, people are still encountering the Risen Lord today. I've even had my own share of encounters, and I'll briefly tell you about a couple of them.

Thirty-five years ago, as a fourteen year old young man with aspirations of studying architecture, I was sitting in church for an evening service. Sitting next to me was this little, old lady. (And I'm serious, when I say that she was a little, old lady.) At some point in the service, she turned to me and asked me, "Are you planning on being a priest?" When I told her that I was going to study architecture, she said, "I think you should reconsider, because I think you'd be a good priest." It was such a brief exchange, and I didn't think much about it at the time. But several years later, as I was preparing for my ordination, I remembered that little, old lady, and realized that I'd had an encounter with the Risen Lord.

And then again, about twenty years ago, while I was working the overnight shift as Protestant Duty Chaplain at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (it was summer work, and part of my seminary education), I received a call from a particular patient on the oncology ward. Cancer had disfigured his body, and he was literally covered with marble-sized bumps. His family, horrified at what was happening to him, had abandoned him. This man was lonely, and he was dying. He and I spoke at length, and we prayed. "Look at all these darned bumps," he'd said to me, "here, feel some of them." And I did. After a while he fell asleep, and I left. Not much later,

after I'd had the chance to reflect on our time together, I realized that I'd had another encounter with the Risen Lord. And from that encounter, this man had gained a measure of peace with his condition, and I had gained a measure of comfort and confidence in my interactions with people who were very ill.

And whether or not you realize it, I'm willing to bet that each of you has had an encounter with the Risen Lord. Jesus himself described what a lot of these encounters look like in a parable: When you give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, you are having an encounter with the Risen Lord. When you welcome the stranger and clothe the naked, you are having an encounter with the Risen Lord. When you visit the sick and those in prison, and when you give something of significance to someone in need, you are having an encounter with the Risen Lord. (Matthew 25:35-36)

Last Friday evening, we held our Good Friday worship service, which consisted of the usual Good Friday liturgy, and, this year, something new: The youth of our parish put on a dramatic recreation of the Stations of the Cross. During the course of that worship experience, I noticed something happening within myself. While Shawn, Chuck and I were reading the solemn collects and prayers, I felt fairly flat and unmoved. But when those young folks "took the stage," and brought the Stations of the Cross alive, "I felt," to quote John Wesley, "my heart strangely warmed." And I was reminded of the fact that we don't experience the Risen Lord through an interaction with *things* nearly as well as we can through *people*. And that's something I think we all need to keep in mind.

You know, when the religious establishment – the men who were responsible for the charges brought against Jesus, and who made sure that his punishment was nothing less than death – once they believed that they had dealt with that bothersome Jesus, they thought it was safe for them to return to "business as usual" – to the worship services and seasonal festivals, to the temple sacrifices, and their endless debates over the finer points of the law. All the unpleasantness that Jesus had wrought in their lives was behind them, they thought, and their lives could return to the normal routines. But what they didn't count on was the fact that the Living God was never going to allow himself to be confined to the traditional, safe and predictable constructs of their religious world. And whether they knew it or not, and whether they liked it or not, there *was* a new kingdom coming. And they didn't have a clue about any of it, because they were still looking for the Living God in their dead and dying rituals, practices, and traditions.

And unfortunately, the temptation still remains for us today to look for an encounter with the Risen Lord simply in our traditions and rituals, in our doctrines and dogmas, in our pious arguments and debates, and ignore all of the flesh and blood encounters happening around us every day. And so often, in all these things, we are like those women who had come to the tomb early on that first Easter morning: we're simply looking for the dead among the dead.

But because of the resurrection of Jesus, *and* because the Spirit of God can be found in every person, in every situation, and in every thing, we can never again look at the world around

us with the same eyes. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, everything has changed, and the assurance that has been given to us is that the Risen Lord is with us yet.

Remember the words of the angels: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has been raised.” And raised, not just in a world two thousand years ago, but raised also in our hearts, in our lives, and in our world.

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