

Looking for the Living
Luke 24:1-12
First Sunday of Easter

Luke 24:1-12

¹On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body.

⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The 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? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

The Sermon

Last week, during the opening round of the NCAA basketball tournament—a time I now regard as the good ol’ days—in one of the first of several upsets, a strong, physically dominating team from Baylor was knocked off by a finesse-oriented team from Yale.

In the press conference after the game, a really good player from Baylor named Taurean Prince was asked by an incredulous reporter how a team like Yale could have outrebounded Baylor.

And he asked aggressively: “How does *Baylor* get outrebounded by *Yale*? How does that happen?”

What happened next was amusing, but more importantly it could be appreciated for a historic undertone: its wit was defiant in a way that would not have played out the same way in times that most of us remember with appalling clarity:

a young, strong, African American man, with hair that some might interpret as rebellious, at an emotionally vulnerable moment—having just lost, in his senior year, in a single-elimination tournament, a game they were not expected to lose—being bullied by an older, white reporter who was asking his question in a way that in court would be called badgering.

The reporter had started off by asking the question in a condescending way. “How does Baylor,” he asked the defeated Baylor players, “get outrebounded by Yale? How does that happen?”

And the moderator says, “Are you directing that towards anyone?” And the reporter, referring to Taurean Prince, says he wants to hear from “the gentleman who just talked about getting outrebounded. He had the stat sheet.”

And then he says directly to the player: “You *said* you got outrebounded; I was surprised you did: 36-32. How does *Yale*, outrebound *Baylor*?”

And the Baylor player, Taurean Prince, answered the question with all the intelligence that it deserved. He said, and this is verbatim:

“Um, you go up and grab the ball off the rim when it comes off? And you grab it with two hands? And you come down with it. And that’s considered a ‘rebound.’ So they got more of [miming a rebound] *those*, than we did.”

The silence in the press room is just radiant. He was out of time to dunk the basketball, but he had just stuffed a bullying, condescending reporter.

There was a time in living memory when the racial dynamics would not have allowed that exchange. And, sadly, infuriatingly, that time is still with us, in circumstances where there are no spotlights, and no media, and nobody else is watching or listening.

Sometimes even to the most optimistic among us, you begin to doubt if we will ever get to where we need to be.

You look at the landscape. More terrorist explosions, more inconsolable tears; Rachel is crying again, and cannot be comforted, this time in Belgium. More mothers and fathers crying until their throats are parched; more lost friends, siblings, partners, colleagues; more wounds that go deep physically and mentally and emotionally, at the hands of tragically, pathetically misguided people who somehow think they are doing something good, when the vast majority of their religious leaders and colleagues are telling them: this is unacceptable and evil—*stop doing it.*

And then we are reminded that this was one we heard about because Europe is psychically closer to home for much of our media's target audience; meanwhile, the specter of violent death prowls Africa and parts of Asia and the Middle East and South America, and those tragedies are rarely mentioned on our airwaves or memorialized in our vigils.

And even the most optimistic among us sometimes start to doubt that it can ever get any better.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women had gone from Galilee with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body down from the cross, and wrapped it in a linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. They saw how the body was laid in the rock tomb, and then went home and prepared the various burial balms which they would bring back after the sabbath, on the first day of the week.

Sometimes, all you can do for a situation is honor what has been lost:

The broken relationship that in hindsight turns out never to have been anything more than superficial;
the job that wasn't quite the right fit and is now over;
the bad decision about one thing or another that's only going to get worse the more you try to tweak it.

Sometimes, you just take the burial spices and go to the tombs and say, You know what? There is no more life in this project, and it would be foolish to keep pretending otherwise—like Phyllis Diller used to say about the steaks they'd serve

at the nightclub where she was performing: “With a little tender loving care, that thing could have pulled through.”

Nope. Not this. Bring the ointments. We’re going to visit the cemetery to pay our last respects to that which is now over.

And think how much was lost. The feeling among Jesus’ followers that day was articulated as two of them were walking from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus, and talking, like you do on a long walk with somebody, about all the devastating events that had just happened.

A stranger came up and started walking with them, and asked what they were talking about, and they just stopped and stood there in their sadness, and told him about how Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word, had just been handed over and sentenced to death and crucified.

“*But we had hoped,*” they said, “*But we had hoped* that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.¹

But we had hoped he was the one who could and would redeem our people.

On some Good Fridays, I have read that lament for a loved one by W.H. Auden, not for the theology, but because it aches with the truth of the pain of loss.

The women went to tend to that which was no longer alive—the person who embodied all the hopes that they or anyone else could ever have; and, maybe, hope itself.

They got to the tomb at early dawn, and the stone had somehow been rolled away from the tomb; and when they went in, to their great consternation, his body was gone.

All of a sudden, two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. And 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?”

What?

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

What does that mean? What are they talking about?

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

We are here because all that’s left to do is treat the body!

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

We didn’t come here looking for the living!

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

Recently I watched again the 1955 documentary short film *Night and Fog*, made about the Holocaust just ten years after the Nazis had surrendered. I saw the gruesome scenes, and heard the voice of those messengers: “*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*”

And I said, I am only looking at death; these poor people... As one tough old American soldier said when years later he was asked about what he had found when they liberated the camps, he just sobbed and said, “Those people, they never had a chance...”

And I watched the brigades of German soldiers, the parade of Nazi dignitaries, and I could not stop hearing the messenger’s voice in my head: “*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*”

And I said, “All I see here is mindless evil, massing its death-obsessed power.”

And they showed the earlier footage of multitudes of everyday German citizens, cheering on the Nazi parade, smiling and giving the Aryan salute. And I heard the messengers in the tomb say, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*”

And I wondered how we can ever tell the difference.

And how would those women have any idea what the messengers in dazzling clothes were asking them, until they said:

He is not here,
not here in this tomb,
not sealed in rock,
not swallowed up by death.

This is a place for that which is dead.

He is not here, but has risen.

You look at friendships that are hopelessly frayed.

You look at people, including that person in the mirror you barely recognize,
who harbor resentments
and stereotypes
and prejudices
and assumptions about people
and beliefs about people.

You look at legislation that allows and even sanctions the dehumanization of people, the disenfranchisement of people, the estrangement of people.

You look at a politics that is broken and bitter and divisive and pandering and treats you like you are the stupidest person who ever walked the earth.

And even the most optimistic among us sometimes begin to think, maybe it’s just time to bring the balm and the ointment and prepare treat the body because there is no life left in it.

And maybe we even get ourselves all the way into the rock-hewn tomb when the messengers finally startle us back to life with the message that we already know:

that a light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.ⁱⁱ

Buechner famously wrote, “It is not a major production at all, and the minor attractions we have created around it—the bunnies and baskets and bonnets, the dyed eggs—have so little to do with what it’s all about that they neither add much nor subtract much.

“It’s not really even much of a story when you come right down to it, and that is of course the power of it. It doesn’t have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of truth. If the Gospel writers had wanted to tell it in a way to convince the world that Jesus indeed rose from the dead, they would presumably have done it with all the skill and fanfare they could muster. Here there is no skill, no fanfare. They seem to be telling it simply the way it was. The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself.

“When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“Oh, angels,” said Ann Weems, “quit your lamenting!

Oh, pilgrims,
upon your knees in tearful prayer,
rise up
and take your hearts
and run!

We who were no people
are named anew
God’s people,
for he who was no more
is forevermore.^{iv}

Ted Loder wrote,

Lord of such amazing surprises
as put a catch in my breath
and wings on my heart,

I praise you for this joy,
too great for words,

but not for tears and songs and sharing;
for this mercy
that blots out my betrayals
and bids me begin again,
to limp on,
to hop-skip-and-jump on,
to mend what is broken
in and around me,
and to forgive the breakers;

for this YES
to life and laughter,
to love and lovers,
and to my unwinding self;

for this kingdom
unleashed in me and I in it forever,

and no dead ends to growing,
to choices,
to chances,
to calls to be just;
no dead ends to living,
to making peace,
to dreaming dreams,
to being glad of heart;

for this resurrection madness
which is wiser than I
and in which I see
how great you are,
how full of grace.
Alleluia!^v

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ⁱ From “Stop all the clocks” in Auden, *Collected Poems*. Vintage, 1991. The poem is untitled but can be found under its first line, “Stop all the clocks.”

ⁱⁱ John 1:5 (NRSV).

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1988; p. 42.

^{iv} Ann Weems, from “And the Glory” in *Kneeling in Jerusalem*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993.

^v Ted Loder, “I Praise You for this Resurrection Madness” in *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*. LuraMedia, 1984.