

Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 24: 1-12 The Living among the Dead

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth:

past events won't be remembered;
they won't come to mind.

18 Be glad and rejoice forever

in what I'm creating,
because I'm creating Jerusalem as a joy
and her people as a source of gladness.

19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad about my people.

No one will ever hear the sound of weeping or crying in it again.

20 No more will babies live only a few days,
or the old fail to live out their days.

The one who dies at a hundred will be like a young person,
and the one falling short of a hundred will seem cursed.

21 They will build houses and live in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

22 They won't build for others to live in,
nor plant for others to eat.

Like the days of a tree will be the days of my people;
my chosen will make full use of their handiwork.

23 They won't labor in vain,
nor bear children to a world of horrors,
because they will be people blessed by the Lord,
they along with their descendants.

24 Before they call, I will answer;
while they are still speaking, I will hear.

25 Wolf and lamb will graze together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but the snake—its food will be dust.

They won't hurt or destroy at any place on my holy mountain,
says the Lord.

Luke 24: 1-12

Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 They didn't know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. 5 The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He isn't here, but has been raised. Remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Human One[a] must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8 Then they remembered his words. 9 When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James,

and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. 11 Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn't believe the women. 12 But Peter ran to the tomb. When he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home, wondering what had happened.

The story of the empty tomb, the resurrection account, is told in all 4 Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and in all different ways. That's right, they don't agree on the number of women who found the tomb empty, the number of angels, the timing of the tomb's opening, the appearance or absence of Jesus...

For some people that's enough to dismiss the resurrection as some made up story. But for those of us who receive the Scriptures as the Living Word, the testimonies of those who experienced Jesus and his ministry while he lived in this world and as the presence of the risen Christ, that only makes sense.

The Gospel writers were not journalists embedded in the closest circle of Jesus' disciples, reporting the events precisely as they took place. It is unlikely that any of them were eyewitnesses themselves. But, for 70, 80, 90, over 100 years after the event, they felt compelled to give testimonies to their experience of Jesus as the Good News, weaving together the accounts that were handed down to them through different oral traditions; those stories that attested to the Good News of Jesus Christ had their origins in their lived experience of Christ.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the discovery of the empty tomb; not just any tomb but the tomb that held Jesus, who had embodied God's love. This empty tomb is at the heart of the Christian hope that because Jesus was raised from the dead, death is not the final reality of human experience. Love is stronger than death. Wherever the death and destruction wield power, Love will overcome it. This is the truth that all four Gospels, with all their differences, attest to.

Another element of the resurrection accounts that is shared by all four gospel is that it was women who first witnessed the empty tomb. In Luke, "they" include Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James. They are the ones Luke named earlier in his Gospel as having provided for Jesus' ministry in Galilean ministry "out of their resources." They were the women who had served and supported Jesus from the beginning in Galilee, then followed him on his journey to Jerusalem, and ultimately to the cross. They witnessed his crucifixion, saw the tomb and the burial.

Even so, what else could they have done but to continue their life as Jesus' disciples. So, on that morning, as soon as Sabbath was over, they came bearing the jar of spices, intending to anoint Jesus' lifeless body. Then, arriving, they found the stone rolled away but did not find his body. Something had taken place, while they were observing Sabbath, and no one was working; God was at work. God, who created the world in the beginning and rested on the seventh day, was at work creating new heaven and a new earth, into which Jesus was raised.

Jesus' empty tomb became the thin place, where the veil separating the heavenly realm and the earthly realm feels especially thin, allowing the two heavenly messenger to come through to them. They helped the women understand what had happened, first orienting the disoriented women by telling them, look, you're looking for the Living among the dead. Then they say it aloud for them what they are seeing, or not seeing, so sinks in: He is not here. Then, before the women can ask "but why," they tell them "He has been raised."

That is a lot to take in, in you can imagine. So, to help them further to connect this huge surprise to their own experience, the angels bring their attention to what they themselves had heard Jesus say: "Remember, what he told you while he was still in Galilee, that he would be betrayed, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then the women remembered his words. So, this is what he was talking about? Aha moment. It was just beyond their imagination, as God's action often is.

Now, the heavenly messengers didn't tell them to go tell the others, but they did anyway. They knew instinctively what was theirs to do as Jesus' disciples; they were to testify, to bear witness to the risen Christ, to the world that still slept, unawares. So, they told the others, the male disciples and they don't believe them. I think it's curious Peter goes and checks it out for himself and finding the testimony of the women to be true, he just goes home and "wonders" to himself what had happened. But the women, we "share" our experiences.

He is not here, but we are here, and we have heard their testimony. We are now the Living among the dead, if by "the Dead" we mean the world where the evil forces pulling us towards death and destruction seem to have its way. We are now the Living among the Dead, because in our hearing of the witness of the Scripture, and in our believing in the power of resurrection, we know the promise of eternal life to be true.

The world we live now is a challenging place. Many people are discouraged, despairing, depressed or outright fearful. Living in another time and another place, Jesus, too,

experienced brutality and cruelty of the evil power that dominated his world and took his life, destroying his flesh. This Jesus God has raised, overcoming the worst hand the Dead could deal. Can we get a witness?

The witnesses to God's presence in Jesus in my life were 3 women, the Japanese pastor who built the church into which I was born, my mother whose back I grew up watching, how her faith shaped how she lived. And the third person God sent into my life, was my grandmother.

When I was in grade school, maybe 2nd or 3rd grade, I was visiting my grandmother who lived in the center of Tokyo with my uncle's family. Sitting with her on the porch facing her small garden, I noticed a bruise on her shin and asked her what happened? My grandmother, looking embarrassed like a little child, said with a twinkle in her eyes, "that's my mischief." Then she proceeded to tell me how she tried to hang herself from a tree in the garden right in front of us, but the rope broke, and she fell. While she was still on the ground, two angels appeared and told her "Not yet. Too soon."

My grandmother, who had survived a great earthquake and a great fire before the war, the fire-bombing of Tokyo during the war and the loss of her children and her husband after the war and now her own health, somehow came to the decision that it was her time to take leave of this world. Then, God foiled her plan and sent her the messengers to remind her to whom her life belonged.

Jesus, the master of my grandmother's life, whose words written in Japanese calligraphy hung on the wall of her humble one room dwelling, was the risen Christ, who took on great suffering and rejection and was killed and buried, and then raised. In her faith in the risen Christ, my grandmother had already died to the world of grief, sorrow and pain, to live in the hope of life in new Jerusalem. The messengers reminded her that there was no hurry to go through the transition of death. She was the Living among the dead, and Jesus was with her, still guiding her and offering hope of her eternal home, until it was her time.

In what ways do we continue to look for Jesus among the dead, that is, among those who live under the Old-World Order in which a powerful tyranny rule with brutality and cruelty.

This Easter beware of the heavenly messengers coming your way to remind you to whom your life belongs, to the resurrected One, our risen and the living Lord. The One who knows your struggle and doubt, your fear and pain, your suffering, your brokenness, your sin, and

proved that none and all of that cannot keep God from offering you a new life. He is not here; he was raised. The same love that claimed Jesus claims us as well.

And then, we will be the messenger, the Living among the dead, and like the women, we will be bearing witness to the risen Christ who took on the suffering of the world to forgive and to redeem.

Of Jesus Christ who came into our world on Christmas and stayed, we have names like Immanuel, God-with-us, or the Word of God Incarnate, God in flesh. If Jesus who lived among us is the Love of God with two feet firmly planted on the ground, then the risen Jesus of Easter is the Love of God who permeates us, who moves our hearts and directs our action to be loving, allowing us to see him in the face of others, especially in the vulnerable ones around us.

The Scriptures testifies to Jesus in both sides of his resurrection event. We recognize him also in our lives and the lives of others. And when we do, we are called to testify, to share our experience of him with others, like my grandmother did that day, telling me the story of the visitation by the angels.

So, again this Easter, may we recognize the presence of our risen Lord in our lives, and may we live into the resurrection so that we go testify to his presence and the coming of God's new heaven and new earth, as a resurrection people, to the world that is still asleep.

Amen.