

Luke 24:4-8
Easter Festival service
March 27, 2016

Luke 24:4-8 New International Version (NIV84)

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. *(Luke 24:8)*

Have you ever become lost while driving? How long did it take before you asked for directions? Suppose you circled around and around and finally asked a pedestrian along the road, "Do you know where so and so lives? His house must be somewhere close." The person looks around, puzzled. All he can see are tombstones, for you are in the middle of a large cemetery. You are looking for the living among the dead.

That's what the women in today's Gospel reading were doing. They were trying to find Jesus in a burial ground. The question becomes appropriate

WHY DO YOU LOOK FOR THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD?

We will consider
and

I. The expectations II. The impact

As we ponder their expectations and why they were seeking the living among the dead we need to remember the last scene they had witnessed. It was Good Friday and as evening approached Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had obtained permission to take the body of Jesus from the cross. There he had committed his spirit into his Father's hands and breathed his last. The soldiers had verified his death. So Joseph had offered his new tomb and with Nicodemus brought him there, wrapping the body in cloth layers with seventy-five pounds of spices in between. There wasn't sufficient time to complete the task or they hadn't done an adequate job, at least from the female viewpoint, so this group of women had prepared more spices and intended to finish the job. The Sabbath followed, a day required to rest, and then it would be dark so they waited overnight. They wanted to show one last act of respect to their friend. They knew the time was limited before decay began, which they assumed would occur. Their task was a top priority, thus they were on their way early in the morning.

As they headed out of Jerusalem they expressed concern about the large stone that covered the entrance of the grave and had been sealed to guard against tampering. It was too big for them to budge. Their heavy hearts expected difficulties.

What else should they be thinking? That was the normal human experience. After people breathe their last, their bodies are placed in the grave and stay there. True, Jesus had raised individuals during his years of ministry, just recently his friend Lazarus, but those were miracles he did and they were rare events, but who could raise him?

When they arrived the reality differed from what they expected. The stone was gone. Had they felt the earthquake that occurred or was it localized to that site? Their curiosity was naturally aroused so they entered the tomb. No body was in view, just the empty grave cloths. What should they make of it? The women were puzzled and confused. They did not have long to wonder. "Suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them." Whether they hadn't been visible before or just went unnoticed we don't know, but now they saw them. The two were angels. Their surprise at the moment and being in the presence of holy beings brought a reaction. "In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground."

Then came the question we consider. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Lest they miss the meaning, the angels continued, "He is not here: he has risen!" It was beyond their expectations. The divine messengers steered their thinking in the right direction. "Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Perhaps it was a mild rebuke but it was offered more so to give them certainty. Jesus had tried to prepare them for the events of these past days. He told them several times what would happen. They didn't grasp the meaning. Likely that first part about dying threw them off track. It was unthinkable. His enemies had desired the death of Jesus and had attempted to kill him before, but he had always escaped. They trusted he was the Son of God. God has all power. He can't die so Jesus didn't really mean it. He must be telling another parable.

We understand their perspective. Life can seem cheap. Death is common. In those days half of the children did not reach adulthood. Fevers and infections that we can readily fight off with drugs that are easily available took lives. Life spans today are longer but death still comes. We view it as part of the cycle of life and know that it will one day be our experience. Who have you seen living on the third day after their death? Cemeteries are quiet places.

We aim too low in our view of life. We may act as if Jesus were dead and powerless. Many years ago there was a movement proclaiming, "God is dead." That upset many Christians. Yet how often haven't we acted as if he were dead? Or maybe we have just treated him as irrelevant. We make our plans and go about life as if this is all there is and we are in charge. We grab and grasp for ourselves and forget that anybody else has anything to say. Troubles come and we try to cope with them with our own resources and power. We view them simply as part of life and plod on meeting our practical needs, sorrowing and not remembering the promises of our Savior.

II.

Then comes Easter and the question of the angels: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The day echoes their announcement: "He is not here. He has risen!" That changes everything. So we look at the impact of the irony. It changes the direction we look. What is the difference between a name on a mailbox or on a tombstone? You might find it on either but you can only visit your friend in one of those places. When our faith is weak, when we are dissatisfied or feel guilty or foolish or unproductive, we are looking in the wrong place. Our contemplation turns inward, to our own heart or feelings. Those are unreliable. Our emotions go up and down. We want God to show us some miracle to affirm his presence. We are trusting our sinful and corrupt ideas.

Where does the risen Jesus direct our attention? To what he said, to the gospel. We find it in the Bible. We encounter it in our baptism to which we can return daily. We know our sins were washed away. The gospel comes to us in communion where we share our Savior's body and blood. We remember what he said and still speaks to us there.

The living Lord changes our view of death. It is not the end. The risen Jesus assures us we will follow him in rising. Our sins that condemned us to die have been paid for. Easter morning places God's stamp of approval on his Son's work. Our bill says, "Paid in full." We will not go to hell to suffer. We do not have to wail and mourn when a loved one dies. We may go to the grave, spend a few moments and place some flowers there, but we do not linger in despair. Our dear one is not really there. We don't seek the living among the dead. Only the earthly tent of their physical body is buried in that plot. The soul of a believer goes to heaven at the moment of death and is living with our victorious Savior in total happiness. How can we not be thankful for that?

We expect the same condition for ourselves. While we will not seek to hasten our death but let God decide when to take us, we do look forward to his summons. If we get a serious diagnosis of a health condition, we know God is preparing our heavenly celebration.

The resurrection of Jesus changes our view of life. Each day on this earth is an opportunity to serve in gratitude the one who provided the victory over the grave. That's why we sing his praises today and welcome the return of the alleluias from which we took a hiatus during the Lenten season. Worship becomes a priority for us and we will be in his house regularly. But we don't stop there. We will be in his Word to hear his promises and reassurances. Our faith will grow. It moves us to strive to obey his will. We seek his guidance through that Word. We want to honor Jesus with our total being, in our

thoughts, words and actions. Life is not for doing and experiencing whatever we want but what he wants. Rather than being self-serving we help and encourage others.

Especially we will want to tell them of our living Savior. We direct their attention to the right places, to the words of Jesus expressing forgiveness for their sins and to his love and care for them.

Life here will continue to bring troubles but we know God is always working to build our faith. We accept his will; we seek his truths and purposes, again in the Word. So today we do not merely celebrate an exciting moment in history. Its impact remains, filling our hearts and lives.

Don't look for the living among the dead. Keep going to the living Word of your living Savior. You will find joy and meaning and purpose for each day as you trust and serve your risen Lord Jesus and look to his gift of eternal life. Happy Easter, everyone!