

12 April 2020

Looking for God . . . Among the Living

Luke 24:1-12

We read the Easter story, telling the foundational event of our faith, from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24, verses 1-12:

24 But on 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.

In this brave new self-isolated world, where church leaders are trying to adapt worship services to a new medium, it occurred to me to wonder about other ways the Easter story might be told. For instance, how might a Hollywood blockbuster about the resurrection go? Well, for starters, it would be dramatic, by which I mean explosions. None of that “the stone’s been rolled away” stuff; the stone would be split in two, or better, reduced to gravel with a massive explosion. Second, it would be decisive. You want an unequivocal ending. Picture this: the stone explodes, and Jesus appears, walking through the smoke in front of a crowd of witnesses, so that everyone could see for themselves that the good guy was back. Finally, it would wrap up all the loose ends in a satisfying way: the bad guys would get what was coming to them – Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate – and the good guys would redeem themselves heroically. I’m picturing a scene where Jesus walks down the main street of Jerusalem, and one by one all the disciples who ran away in the garden come back, falling into line behind him – a final victory march as the credits roll.

But that’s not the story we have, is it? No, Jesus’ resurrection took place quietly, before dawn, in a deserted garden. The risen Jesus didn’t appear to crowds but one at a time to individuals and small groups of his closest friends, then would disappear again. Neither dramatic nor decisive. In fact, even the people who knew him best, who had traveled with him for months or years, didn’t recognize him at first. Not by sight, anyway. And if that was true of the people who knew him best, then you *know* that nobody from the city saw him and recognized him. And finally, in our story, nobody really gets a satisfying comeuppance or redemption. Sure, Judas committed suicide, but the other villains went on to long subsequent careers, and those disciples who ran away on Thursday night continue to look pretty shabby right through to the end of the gospels. Frankly, it’s a terrible script. Not even Russell Crowe singing a solo could make it a worse movie.

And the end result of this unsatisfying narrative is that the very cornerstone of our faith can feel sort of iffy. From an outsider’s perspective, we have a man killed, whose body goes

missing a few days later. His followers claim that he rose from the dead, but nobody else seems to have seen him, and when you ask those followers to show him to you, they say, “Oh, he’s not here anymore. He ascended unto the Father.” Can you blame some people for being skeptical? It feels as if there may be ways to explain the data without dragging in resurrection. To be clear, I believe the story. I believe that Jesus literally, historically rose from the dead, in a different but still physical form. In a few minutes I’ll tell you why I do, but my reasons aren’t going to persuade anyone who isn’t already looking for a reason to believe. Our faith is based on, well, on *faith* not on conclusive evidence. If you’re looking for proof, our story is kind of weak.

In fact – just an aside here – I kind of think that the very weakness of the gospel evidence is a point in favor of the story actually having happened. What I mean is that if – as many have suggested – the resurrection story was something that the disciples cooked up so as to keep their movement alive, wouldn’t you think they could have come up with a less crappy story – one with fewer holes in it? I’m trying to imagine that Zoom meeting: “I know, let’s tell everyone that we saw him alive, but didn’t even recognize him ourselves! That’ll be persuasive!” Who would think that? This by no means rises to the level of proof, but it’s interesting.

So here’s my question: why is the story so weak? We imagined how a Hollywood director might portray the resurrection: dramatic, decisive, satisfying. Well, we Christians believe that the God who created the entire universe is the one who *did* direct the resurrection, so why is it so anticlimactic? Why are there so few witnesses? And why does it lead into years and decades of trial and persecution for Jesus’ followers instead of happily ever after? If this is God’s plan, what was God thinking?

Well, for starters, that’s a dangerous question. People who claim to know exactly what God was thinking rank high on the list of people to run, not walk, away from. But I think we can point out that the weirdness of the resurrection story is not really a new kind of weirdness. In fact, it’s pretty consistent with, oh say, all the rest of scripture. Let’s work backward. This weird resurrection – quiet, inconspicuous, offered only to a few people – meshes pretty well with Jesus’ teaching. Remember what he said the Kingdom of God is like? A little yeast that is worked into the lump of dough that, invisibly, changes it into something else. It’s like a tiny mustard seed, insignificant, and yet look at the shrub that it becomes! It’s like when seeds are scattered willy-nilly and most of them wither away, but a few land on fertile soil and then look at the grain they produce! And Jesus’ followers? They’re supposed to be servants. Insignificant, humble, unimpressive. That’s what God’s looking for. And it’s not just what Jesus taught; it’s how he lived. He chose unlikely disciples – uneducated, unpromising, unsavory – and just a few of them at that. When he healed people, he told them to keep the news to themselves and not spread the word. And when word finally did get out and crowds gathered around him, he tended slip away from them, going back to his tiny group of riff-raff. Everything he said and everything he did seemed to be aimed at *not* being dramatic.

But it isn’t just Jesus’ life and ministry. This weird pattern meshes with the Old Testament as well. The God who created the whole world invariably chose to work through one person at a time, or one family, or just one nation – letting that subset of humanity be the vessel for God’s revelation to everyone else. And look at the individuals and the nation that God chose! Shepherds, nomads, wanderers. God could have picked Greece or Egypt or China or India, all of which had majestic civilizations, but no, God went with Abraham. Once again, God appears to have zero interest in working by means that we humans would consider impressive. In fact, this

goes back even before Abraham, to the very fabric of creation. Genesis 1, describing the creation of plants says that every plant was created “with its seed in it.” A principle of insignificance is baked into creation itself. We assume that God could have created a world that followed any set of rules, but God created a world in all life begins with a seed: tiny and insignificant in appearance but that, in time, can grow into something magnificent.

So why in the world would be we surprised at the way God directed Easter? Insignificant beginnings revealed to a few, but offering vast potential? That’s how God has always worked – maybe the *only* way God has ever worked. Baby born in a stable? Typical God. Rise from the dead before dawn in a deserted garden? What else would you expect? And from that all-but-invisible beginning to transform the lives of those early, unpromising followers, turning them into men and women of impossible courage and unquenchable love, and then, from that seed planted in riff-raff, go on to change the world? Really, that’s *so* God.

For what it’s worth, that’s my proof of the resurrection. It’s the inexplicable thing that happened to those disciples and still happens today; it’s when people change and grow and endure beyond endurance. God continues to plant that resurrection seed of hope, a seed that can transform a life. I know that this proof won’t necessarily convince anyone, but it is enough for me, because I too have experienced that seed of hope, and day by day, in fits and starts, and sometimes two steps forward and three steps back, it is transforming me. Because I know that miracle myself, I can see it in others. And I believe.

In Luke’s account of the resurrection, which we read earlier, the “two men in dazzling clothes” ask the women in the garden an interesting question: “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” It’s a good question. Beyond the obvious literal meaning – Jesus isn’t in the grave anymore – there’s a deeper level there, and in this day of pandemic and fear, as our nation and world begins to ask “Where is God?” it’s even more important. When you look for God, look among the living. That is, look for the signs of life that have always marked the steps of God. Do *not* look among the things invented by human beings, not in systems of thought or philosophy or theology, not in organizations or institutions or structures. None of these things are bad, but at best they are tools for maintenance. They are the works of our hands and minds – invented, not created. They are dead, and we need to stop looking for the living God among the dead. Instead, look for the living God where new life springs up, where there is growth and transformation and endurance beyond explanation. We look for God when a normal and probably unimpressive human being – most of us are – becomes a hero and puts on her nurse’s uniform again and walks back onto the ward. We look for God when people risk their lives for strangers, when they show self-sacrificial love to people with whom they have nothing in common just because those people are hungry. We look for God in small things – children, anonymous acts of kindness, quiet forgiveness, teddy bears taped to windows, music played through glass doors for quarantined seniors, Arab and Israeli paramedics pausing to pray side by side between hospital runs . . . you want to know where to look for a living God? Look there. It’s where the insignificant resurrection of our Lord points. It’s where God has always been.

So here we are, Easter Sunday. It’s not what we’re used to. We usually have brass and pageantry and explosive choir anthems and “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” sung by hundreds of voices. I look forward to all those things next year. They’re fun, and we ought to rejoice. But it’s not a bad thing for us to experience a more subdued Easter this year as we shelter in place. It can remind us that the resurrection that we celebrate today was decisively not dramatic. There

were no trumpets in the garden. Jesus didn't rise so as to take the world by storm. Jesus rose to plant tiny seeds of almost invisible hope that, for all their insignificance, bear the power to change lives and transform the world.

Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed.

We close again this week with the prayer I continue finding hope in, from the Northumbrian monastic community:

Lord, you have always given bread for the coming day;
and though I am poor, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given strength for the coming day;
and though I am weak, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given peace for the coming day;
and though of anxious heart, today I believe.

Lord, you have always kept me safe in trials;
and now, tried as I am, today I believe.

Lord, you have always marked the road for the coming day;
and though it may be hidden, today I believe.

Lord, you have always lightened this darkness of mine;
and though the night is here, today I believe.

Lord, you have always spoken when time was ripe;
and though you be silent now, today I believe. Amen.