

Easter Sunday
March 27, 2016

“Looking for the Living”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 10:34-43 ~ Luke 24:1-12

Isn't our sanctuary beautiful this morning? Aren't you beautiful? It goes without saying that we have the most beautiful children in Vilas County, and I'm so delighted to have "all ya'll" here. But I do have to ask, why *are* we all here this morning? Is it because we have some time to kill between our egg hunt and our Easter ham? Is it because we felt like getting all dressed up in our Easter finery? Is it because we were drawn here this morning for some reason that we don't quite understand? No, I think we are all here today for the very same reason ... we are looking for Jesus.

Haven't we come to this place on the rumor that Christ is risen from the dead and might just show up? Don't we hope to catch a glimpse of him here at the church so we can share somehow in that amazing power that he has to bounce back from anything ... to overcome death itself?

But then, if we are honest with ourselves, perhaps the risen Christ is the last thing we expect to see today. Maybe we're more like those women, preparing our special spices and coming to the tomb early in the morning of the first day of the week to embalm Jesus. Maybe the church is where we've buried him ... locked him up in our expectations and beliefs ... imprisoned him in stained glass and stone so we can visit once in a while and pay homage ... but keep him safely in his place so he won't interrupt our plans.

What do *you* think? Do we really want to see the Jesus of the Bible here in this place today? I mean, we're keen on the Jesus who heals the sick. We love the Jesus who welcomes the little children. But I'm not so sure we want to meet the Jesus who told the rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give it to the poor ... or the Jesus who said we would be forgiven in the same measure that we forgive others. That Jesus isn't safe at all.

But then, we don't really get to choose which living Jesus we meet, do we? And truth be told, we don't need a Jesus made in our image ... domesticated to suit our purposes. We need a Jesus who is powerful and free ... willing to comfort, yes, but able to *confront* us, too ... and call us out of hatred into love ... out of anger into peace ... out of death into life.

Before the Easter stories in the Bible shout joy and triumph and glory, they are full of awe and mystery ... even confusion and fear. The women rise with the sun expecting everything to be the way it's always been. They rely on it ... the safety of the familiar. It is what it is. Someone dies ... they stay dead. A movement fails ... it's over. Evil crushes goodness ... goodness remains crushed. The women come to the tomb to mourn ... to finish embalming his body ... but Luke tells us that the tomb is empty. And they are perplexed.

Don't you just hate the way life brings you those unexpected surprises? I mean, you're gliding along smoothly ... everything according to plan, and suddenly you hit a roadblock that you didn't expect ... a detour ... the bridge is out and you can't get where you thought you were going. It's disorienting when something happens that you can't control. And when we can't control things we have no guarantee that they will be the way we want them.

No one expected the Messiah to be a carpenter's boy. No one expected Jesus to end up on a cross. And no one expected to find the tomb empty. Now they don't know what in the world might happen next. Maybe that's what it means to follow Jesus in this life ... not having everything under control ... never knowing what to expect ... always being a little disoriented ... never knowing when we may be plunged into transition ... pushed in a new direction ... but trusting and following him anyway. Isn't that the definition of "faith?"

The women stand confused, interrupted, gazing into a vacant tomb. And that's where Easter begins ... in all the Bible stories ... after the cross ... before he appears ... at a tomb ... with the emptiness ... the void ... the nothingness that always follows death. And I mean any death ... the death of a dream ... the death of a relationship ... the real death of a friend or family member or life partner. What follows is the void. It is the in-between time ... when you don't have a clue what will happen next ... but you know that you have to move on anyway. You don't have any other choice but to move on. But you do have a choice in how you move on.

Do we move on with courage ... knowing that we can't hold on to what's already gone? Do we move on with faith ... trusting that a good God will get us through this ... and bring us to a new beginning on the other side? Do we move on with love and kindness ... realizing how tender and precious all of life is ... even the lives of those who have hurt us? Or will time and momentum drag us kicking and screaming and angry where we don't really want to go? Always, at those moments ... between endings and beginnings in life ... we get stuck... like these women staring into emptiness ... perplexed, confused, paralyzed. They can't move an inch.

Enter our angels. Most times I think that angels are regular people doing an irregular thing ... sometimes without even knowing it themselves. A friend, a spouse, a partner, a child ... says something that grabs you by the ears and stares you in the face ... the unblinking truth. It may not even be what they meant to say ... but it's what you needed to hear. They often say to me, in effect just what the angels at the tomb said ... *"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"* And there's our motto for the day. Write it in calligraphy ... hang it on your wall ... tape it to your refrigerator ... and read it every morning before you head out the door ... *"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"* Spending all your waking hours working in a job because it makes you feel important but will use you up and burn you out ... *"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"* Hoping that the future can be like the past again ... even though the past has been past for a long time now and it never really was as good as you remember it ... *"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"* Dwelling on that "Someday I'll ..." where you think "Someday I'll be happy when I finally reach my goal ... get my degree ... find my dream job ... buy my dream house ... pay off all my bills." A lot of people here can tell us, we won't be any happier than we are now ... because unless we learn to be happy in the now, we will never be happy in the "some time" ... *"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"*

The angels tell us it's time to move on ... to let the Lord roll away the stone and free us from our tombs ... to look for the living out there where life is waiting for us. No need staying in that "stuck place" any more. Look for the living. And "the living" has a name. It is Jesus ... the incarnation of divine love ... God in human flesh.

It's a funny thing about all these Easter stories. They start with emptiness, confusion, fear. They take us to the dead zone ... an empty tomb ... the void just past death, and right there ... right then ... they tell us to start looking for Jesus. It's like we have to have the board wiped clean before we can start a new lesson.

And soon, very soon, the disciples did start seeing him here and there ... now and again. Only they, just like us, can't control him. He shows up when he feels like it. He shows up where he has told them he will be ... on the first day of the week when they gather in an upper room ... when they're walking away in sadness, ready to give up on the whole project. He comes to their home. He sits at their family table. He meets them where they work. He stands on the shore cooking breakfast ... preparing what they're going to need before they even know he's there. They find him when they have the faith to look ... and sometimes when they're not looking for him at all.

This group of women ... Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, some others with them ... ran back and tell the men what they've seen and heard. It's the first Easter sermon, and it's preached by women, we should note. And like most sermons, no one seems too convinced by it. They think it's an idle tale. But the women have already believed without seeing him. And they became the angels of the resurrection that the men needed to hear. "Why are you hiding in this room? A new day has dawned. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen." Luke says that Peter had to run see for himself, and what he saw was the same "nothing" that they saw. But soon, very soon, he will see, and he will believe!

I suppose we can't criticize all these characters in the Bible for not believing at first. It sounds like a legend, too good to be true. But it also asks a lot of us *if it is* true ... and so we might not really want it to be true, in our heart of hearts. If it's true, then we can't give up on each other. If it's true, then we can't give up on ourselves. If it's true, then we can't even give up on our biggest dreams ... peace on earth ... good will to men and women ... liberty and justice for all ... ethics in business ... honesty in government ... a church which actually embodies Christ's love ... no hungry child ... no lonely senior adult... no despised and rejected and disregarded ... but a new creation where all humanity lives in paradise because Christ lives within us. If it's true, then we have to live with Jesus' demands that we love one another ... that we love our enemies ... that we treat people kindly ... that we forgive without even being asked. If it is true, then death is not the end ... no matter of evil can thwart God's ultimate intention to do good ... which means anything good is possible that God gives us the hearts to imagine.

Now we all know the old, old story ... Christ has died, Christ was buried, Christ is risen. We may not see him in this world the way Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter and Doubting Thomas and the rest of his disciples saw him. But he left us some clues about how we might see him still walking among us. He spoke of being one of "the least of these," so if you see one of them ...

you may be seeing the risen Christ. He said we could love him most by loving one another and imitating his love ... so if you see a loving person, you may be seeing the risen Christ.

That's where he said he would meet us, and that's where we will see him. And every time he appeared to those disciples after that first Easter morning until he ascended into heaven, he gave them a mission. He told them to be angels in the world ... to tell the good news to all humankind ... in essence, to ask all they met, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The Bible says that Christ is risen in us, in each believer ... and in the church, the whole body of Christ. So if we are going to see the risen Christ, we'll have to see him in each other. If we are going to convince the world that Christ is risen, we will have to be the evangelists ... the "good angels" who show them Christ risen in us.

Jesus never actually shows up in the gospel story we read in Luke this morning. Today we only get the announcement. He is not there. He is risen. Go to the places where he sends you. He will meet you there. He won't let the church become his tomb. The place where Jesus appears is out there in the every day world in which you live ... in your own home in the faces of your family when you sit down together to eat. At your work, and you realize Jesus is there asking you questions about how you go about your business ... how you treat the other people who work with you. You come by here on a week night, and here is Jesus, drinking coffee and sharing stories with our brothers and sisters in AA and NA. Maybe he shows up in an unexpected healing of what's been ailing you ... or in a sudden ability to accept what's been ailing you so that you can bear it and use it to help somebody else. And suddenly, what's new is you ... or rather, Christ in you. So the choice is ours ... will we see him and believe, or believe him and see?

Please allow me to be your angel today. I ask each and every one of you, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Allow me tell you the scary truth again ... that Christ is risen and nothing is just what it seems because everywhere a new creation has begun. Allow me to remind you that God has the final word and the final word is life ... so get going, move on, get busy living. Allow me to send you out of here with your head on a swivel looking for him ... because he will show up in your life if you believe it ... if you look for him...and maybe even if you're not looking for him at all. And allow me to appoint you ... to send you out as angels of the good news to tell the whole world ... or at least your world that Christ is risen. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Amen.

May we pray?

Help us to be Easter people Lord. Raise us from dead ambitions and lost hopes and allow us to love the world through us. Make us your angels in the world so that by our loving others might know the living Lord and rejoice that Christ is risen indeed. Amen.