

Looking in the Right Direction

Luke 24:1-12

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This morning, the passage upon which I'll be preaching has already been read for us earlier in the service. It is a part of the resurrection narrative where the first evangelists, this group of women, went to Jesus's tomb. And this morning as we prepare to hear from God's word, I want to remind us of that portion of the text which I'll be spending most of the time in this morning. It goes from verse 5 to the end of verse 8. This is God's word. Hear now this part of the testimony, Luke 24:5-8.

And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise. And they remembered his words. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, we ask that you would open our eyes and hearts and our minds to wondrous treasures in your word, that you would renew us, strengthen us in Jesus Christ alone. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

This Easter season, the different sermons and homilies I've given this past week, I've decided to outline them all in various questions, and this morning is no different. As we look at this passage together in its broader context, I want us to consider three questions which the text asks of us directly and then also, I think, implies. The first question we need to ask is, what were these women actually doing? Secondly, the question that is at the center of the text, why do you seek the living among the dead? And why we ought to be very grateful for that question. The third question is, why is there so much confusion and disbelief at these events? So, what were these women doing? Why do you seek the living among the dead? And why is there confusion and disbelief?

As we consider this first question of exactly what these women were doing, I must tell you that I spent a lot of time looking at these various events while in seminary looking at the different circumstances that surrounded these gospel narratives. But I haven't ever really spent much time in sermons looking at the historical context or the traditions that underly these practices partially because I thought maybe the audience would be bored out of their skulls. But this year, I said, oh well, so be it. To be able to understand fully what's happening in this text, we need to understand why they were doing this on this particular day because in some sense it is unique, unique in its timing but not unique in its practice.

So, let's look briefly at what the text tells us is that on the first day of the week at early dawn, they went to the tomb taking spices that they had prepared, and they had found the stone rolled away from the tomb. But when they went in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. So, why were they there to begin with? To understand fully, we must understand the Jewish practice of dealing with the dead.

Now, this is important because the Bible talks about death all the time, and dead people. It does not get queasy at dealing with death. Death is not far from people in the New Testament or in the Bible. It is often very far from us. The whole funeral industry, and in some way, shape or form, the regulations around it and the laws that have to be passed, in many ways is really just about separating us from the immediacy of death. In some sense, it's trying to soothe us in saying, death is natural, death is okay. But the Bible has a far more courageous and realistic view of death. It is not natural, and it is not okay, and it is not far from us.

Just briefly looking at some of the Jewish traditions – because there were many, and many practices and laws that surround it – there was a great deal of ceremonial care that was given to those who had passed. In fact, when a person passed away, his or her eyes were closed, and they were kissed on the forehead. And they were then cared for in this way. We learn of these things both in Genesis as well as Acts. There was a washing of the body. There was anointing with perfumes and spices and aloes and nard. And then after the person passed – by the time that Jesus was alive – there was an elaborate practice of wrapping the body in shrouds, and small pieces of linen were used to clasp the hands and the feet and the body.

And once this was done, after the perfumes and nard and so forth were provided, they did that because frankly, dead people stink. But if you've not been around someone who has passed away and then had the unfortunate opportunity to be with someone and visit a home where someone had passed away, but no one realized it, you will never forget that for the rest of your life. I remember the first time, and that will never leave my consciousness or memory.

So, very elaborate care was given. But after that happened, they received friends and family to the home generally very quickly, within eight hours of someone dying. Simply because of the nature of the atmosphere and the environment in which they lived, they didn't allow much time to pass. And so, in visiting the family with friends, there was then the practice of actually going to the grave site.

Now, the grave site was often very close to the village or town in which you lived, generally not much further than 50 yards. Now, if you were from a wealthy family, you or your family had a tomb. Now, these tombs were oftentimes made in the side of a cliff or in a rocky area and they were rectangular in shape. And they were deep and had different rooms in them, particularly if your family was wealthy there was a different room for different members who had passed away. Over that tomb was rolled a stone tablet. It would roll along a channel. Or, there was a large rock that was then stuffed into the opening. That stone was often whitewashed to at least indicate to those who are passing by that this was a grave site.

But getting there was something of a ceremony. I don't know if you've ever been to New Orleans and seen a funeral there, but a traditional New Orleans funeral is often seen with a band and family marching through the streets. Well, imagine all of that but it's not celebratory. It was very mournful with pen wailing and throwing of dust in their hair. And if you were a poor family or didn't have a large family, you had to come up with a way to provide and hire for professional mourners because as you marched, people would go before you with instrumentation and singing and wailing loudly all the way to the grave site.

And then once someone passed away, it was customary for the family members to, of course, spend a time in mourning. And there would be lots of food. We still do that; we tend to respond to these sorts of events with food, and so did they. But if you were a son or a daughter or a spouse of someone who had passed away, you would spend the next 30 days wearing certain kinds of clothing and not wearing other kinds of clothing that would at least indicate that you were in prayer. You wouldn't wear those things. And if you were greeted in the street while in a period of mourning, you didn't respond not because you were rude, you're just in a period of mourning.

And these practices were elaborate and practiced over and over again. In fact, they also resisted any form of burning the bodies or allowing them to do anything other than having their bodies laid in the ground as a whole because the Jewish practice found the practice of cremation repulsive because they believed and looked forward to the resurrection at the end of history. And so, they did likewise.

Now, if your family was not wealthy, you had to find a place to bury your loved ones. And you didn't have a tomb, so you would have to find a field somewhere. And these large vertical graves were built, and the bodies would be lowered into this tube-like, cylinder vertical grave. But then a year later, you would return to the grave site of your loved one and you would remove the bones. And these bones would be placed in a box that would then go with you wherever it is that you live or travel. This is a deeply

biblical practice. We hear of it from the Old Testament when we hear these words, “Rested with their ancestors.”

You see, it also concerns, for example, one of the patriarchs Joseph when Joseph took an oath from the sons of Israel saying, “God will visit you and you shall carry up my bones from here,” Genesis 50:25. And the scriptures say that Moses left Egypt, and he took the bones of Joseph with him for Joseph had solemnly sworn to the people of Israel saying, “God will visit you, then you must carry my bones with you from here,” Exodus 13:19. And the scriptures say that there entering the land, the bones of Joseph which the people of Israel had brought up from Egypt were buried at Shechem in the portion of the ground which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance and a descendance of Joseph. And so, Joseph rested with his ancestors until their bodies were to rise at the last.

This was the thorough Jewish practice of dealing with the dead. And so, you add to that the other purification laws which stipulate that if you are Jewish, you are not to touch a dead body. If you do, depending on where you touched that body, you had different practices that you had to go through to go through ritual purification. So, if you generally touch a dead body, you were considered unclean and unable to practice within the communal life of Israel unless you were cleansed for seven days. And the way that happens is on the third day you take a cleansing, and then on the seventh day you take a cleansing, and you’re pronounced ritually clean.

What we have in the case of Jesus is that Jesus was crucified just prior to the Sabbath beginning. So, we know that His body was laid in a grave. We hear this from the testimony of the gospels. His body was also wrapped carefully, but all the preparations were not able to be finished. And so, you absolutely were forbidden as a Jew to touch a dead body on the Sabbath. And so, on the first hour of the third day, which by the way is an important number within the scriptures, that on the third day, often either cleansing or salvation or redemption is marked out throughout the scriptures in various places. So, on this third day, it was considered the third day because of the way in which the Jewish clock and calendar worked. The first day was Friday, even though Jesus was crucified at the end of it, it’s still considered the first day. Second day, Holy Saturday as we would call it. And then the third day at the very earliest hour, they go, and they are prepared to finish the preparation of Jesus’s body.

So, this is what is surrounding ritually, and historically, and traditionally of why these women were going to care for Jesus’s body. In other words, they were doing what they were expected to do. They were doing what they had been taught to do.

Now, we come to the second question right in the middle of the text. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” What a fabulous question. And why I’m grateful, very grateful, that it’s here, I’m grateful on the one hand that this question is here because if this was all made up out of whole cloth, you would never have included this question. And you never would have included this story. Why? Because these are the people who had been with Jesus, and they weren’t expecting it. So, if this is made up, why would the people who were closest to Jesus need to be asked this question?

And the second reason I’m grateful for this question being asked is because, frankly, of our 21st century snobbery. We tend to think that people only believed in resurrection stuff and superstitious stuff decades, centuries, and certainly a millennium ago. They weren’t in the scientific age, they really didn’t have what we have, so they believed this stuff. No, they didn’t. They didn’t believe it any more than any of you in here may not believe it. I know for a long time I didn’t believe it. They are just like us because even though they might have expected what the afterlife might have been, they most certainly would not have expected this.

This question being right here in the middle, we need to look at it a little more deeply. So, what were they doing? The text tells us they were bringing spices and they were bringing other preparations and nard and aloes to spread over Jesus’s body. Why? Because frankly it would stink and they were doing it out of devotion and out of honor. So, they’re presented with this question which allows us, if you will, to

take a can opener and open it up a little more. But we're not just going to open up the text, we're going to open up our own hearts. And what's going to be required is that we use our imagination just a little bit. And so, I apologize beforehand, just work with me on this. As a literature major, I couldn't help but go here.

And it's this. There is a very big metaphor that we can't miss here, and the metaphor is they're doing what they're expected to do by taking spices and perfume to what? A dead body. That's what you do. So, you and I don't do that, at least not with bodies that are in the grave. We do that with our bodies every single day. The metaphor is we're putting flowers and perfume and nard and aloes on these bodies which by every indication are not doing so well in the long run. Now, it's April, it's the heart of the cycling season. So, if you don't know me, I love cycling. I was a competitive cyclist for years. And man, I used to weight 131 pounds. I don't weight that little anymore, and I bought all these suits when I used to weight that amount. And this morning, it's April. I haven't ridden enough. And this suit was a little tight. And my wife will respond, "You simply need to ride more because we're not getting new suits." I don't have spunks, but maybe I can work something out with lykra underneath my suits. I don't know. But that's another point.

The issue is we keenly feel the issues of these bodies that are wasting away all the time, don't we? And not only do we look to the outside to make ourselves look better, smell better every single day, but also not just what we do to ourselves, what we're asking for others and for other things to do for us. We want life to bring perfume. We want life to bring the pleasant-smelling spices and the aroma of flowers to us, do we not? We're doing things to dying bodies all the time. The question is, do we have eyes to see it?

Consider for just a moment the French philosopher Alain de Botton who in his book *Status Anxiety* writes this about himself and about us. See if this at all rings true of you. It definitely rings true of me. He says,

"Our ego, our self-conception, could be pictured like a leaking balloon forever requiring helium of external love to remain inflated, and ever vulnerable to the smallest pin pricks of neglect. This is something at once sobering and absurd in the extent to which we are lifted by the attentions of others and sunk by their disregard. Our mood may blacken because a colleague greets us distractively or our telephone calls or e-mails go unreturned. And we are capable of thinking life worth living because someone remembers our name or sends us a fruit basket. We discern evidence within ourselves of both cleverness and stupidity, humor and dullness. And yet, amid such uncertainty, we typically turn to the wider world to settle the question of our own significance. Neglect highlights our own negative self-assessments while a smile or compliment rapidly brings out the converse. We seem beholden to the affections of others to endure ourselves."

We depend on our jobs. I don't know what you get up and do tomorrow morning, but we want to make a difference either in our family, in our world. And we hope that our lives have some purpose. We long for that, do we not?

A friend of mine who's almost 65 years old, in a phone conversation I had with him this week, he said the following to me. He said, "I guess I'm just hard-headed, but I now realize even at age 65, I'm still trying to prove my father wrong, and I would be a success. And the problem is that my lack of contentment with where God has me is not enough, and I make people around me miserable." And so, he wrote a letter to his wife asking her for forgiveness because of his lack of contentment and always wanting more. And how he keeps wanting to prove to his father, I made it. And he then turned to me, and he said, "Randy, I am sorry if my own lack of contentment has tried to draw from you something which you could never really give me."

Now, that's an honest heart. And these flowers smell fantastic. Whoever is responsible for all this, it smells fantastic. And as I was sitting there, I was thinking, we just want more of this and we're just trying to squeeze the fragrance out of life. And I look out here this morning, as I said earlier, and you all look good. There's no one here who looks particularly needy at all. But the truth is, we are.

The British poet Stevie Smith, her most famous poem is called "Not Waving but Drowning." This is what it says,

"Nobody heard him, the dead man. But still, he lay moaning. I was much further out than you thought, and not waving, but drowning. Poor chap. He always loved larking, and now he's dead. It must have been too cold for him. His heart gave way, they said. Oh, no, no, no, it was too cold always. Still, the dead one lay moaning. I was much too far out all my life, and not waving, but drowning."

And in an interview decades ago prior to her passing, Stevie Smith was asked about this most popular of her poems. And she responded this way. She says,

"You know, I was inspired because I read about a man getting drowned once, and his friends thought that he was waving to them from the sea. But really, he was drowning. And then I thought that in a way, it is true of life too, that a lot of people pretend out of bravery, really, that we're all a very golly and ordinary sort of chaps. But really, they do not feel at home at all in the world or able to make friends easily. So, then they joke a lot and laugh. And people think they're quite all right and jolly nice, too. But sometimes, that brave pretense breaks down. And then, like the poor man in this poem, they are lost not waving, but drowning."

You see, we are not much different than these women in this passage. They did not expect resurrection. They were just going about their business doing what they're supposed to do, bringing spices and perfume to a dying body. You and I are no different. What did we come here this morning to expect? Is it mere ritual? Is it mere remembering? Does the Lord want us to experience more? Does he want us to receive more?

Well, therein lies the third question. Why is there confusion and disbelief in this passage? After these angels announce to these women that, in fact, He is risen and not there, they then explain to these women these three infinitives that are important for us to here. They said, "Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, he must be crucified, and on the third day rise." And then verse 8, "And they remembered his words." I am so grateful for that sentence from these angels who delivered these messages, the reason being that it wasn't just that these women did not expect it, none of the disciples expected it. And that ought to be a comfort to us.

Think about this for just a minute. In Luke 9:22, this is what Jesus says – and in my Bible, it's in red and white. He says, "And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one," now, He's speaking to His disciples and all those who were gathered. He said, "The son of man must suffer many things. He will be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, be killed, and on the third day be raised." That was the first time that He told them this, according to this part of the gospel of Luke. He then repeats it in verse 44. He then repeats it in chapter 13, chapter 17, and chapter 22.

Here's the thing, why is there so much confusion and doubt and disbelief? It's because of the same reason it is for you and me. Can this be true? We say we believe it on the one hand, but at the street level of our lives, we do not live as if resurrection is true. There's a gap between what we say we believe and how we live. But the reason why we celebrate Easter Sunday morning is to remember that we are no different, that He had to be given over, that He had to be crucified, and that He was raised on the third

day. Jesus came to die for the brokenness that you and I are trying to cover up. He is the one through His body and His blood, He brings the only perfume that makes us clean. He brings us the only righteousness that can train us out of trying to squeeze life out of everything else and everybody else. Jesus came to die for our sin. Sin is seeking life outside of Christ, seeking life wherever we try to find it. And we are trying it very hard. And that is what sin is. And we're trying to walk in our own pride in rebellion and saying, hey God, I got this. I don't need you. But the resurrection comes again, and He says, I know you think you got it, but I came to die for you. And you are resurrected, and I am resurrected, and you will be resurrected in me.

He died for our sins and was willing to be stripped naked on a cross, robbed of all decency and thrown all kinds of shame towards Him so that you and I might have life. Even in the midst of our doubt and rebellion and confusion, the gospel of grace comes again and again and again.

Hear Paul in the letter to the Colossians. "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." So, he seems to draw a distinction between heavenly stuff and earthly stuff. That's not what he means. It's not that we don't care about the stuff that you and I have to do tomorrow. We ought to care about it. The work that we do, the families that we have, the pursuits that we have, and we're to do them all in the name of Christ and for His glory. The difference is, we're no longer trying to seek life from them or to gain our significance from them. But it is only in union with Christ that then transforms the things that are here. And we are united to Him, according to Paul, by faith raised with Him, and now we recognize what we do here, we do with the long view. It is for His glory, not for my gain.

And when we come here on this Easter Sunday morning, listen to what happens. After they're instructed, they run. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles in verse 11, "But these words seemed to them as an idle tale," they did not believe them. Have you ever thought that if Jesus would just show up this morning, everybody would get it! Really? He did then and they didn't get it. He reminded them and they didn't get it.

In other words, believing in the resurrection isn't a matter of logic or reason or a leap of faith. It's none of those things. It's a gift that the resurrection, that it happened, and that Jesus is living and seated at the right hand of God the Father is not a matter of you and I trying to make it true. It is the fact that it is a gift that has to come down from heaven, and His Holy Spirit has to wake you and I up to all of our running about, and we finally come to terms with the fact, yes, He is risen. He is risen indeed. Help me, O Lord, in my unbelief. But it begins by acknowledging, Lord Jesus, I don't believe, but help me in my unbelief. It's simply coming to Him and saying, I am a sinner, have mercy upon me. And in His kindness, it leads us to repentance. And we see, He came while we were yet His enemies, and He died for us. And He was raised to life even to those who at first could not believe it even though He had taught them.

But even though the disciples had rejected it, Peter, the loud mouth, Peter had said, "No, this will not happen to you," or, "No, you can't clean my feet," "No, I don't know Jesus." And the one to whom he spoke one of those rejections was to a woman who said, hey, aren't you one of Jesus's friends? No. Now, he's receiving the testimony of this group of women, and he runs. And what does the passage tell us? "But Peter rose and ran to the tomb stooping and looking in, and he saw linen clothes by themselves, and he went home marveling at what had happened." He didn't have to figure it all out. His brain didn't have to be wrapped around it. He just marveled that maybe, just maybe, Jesus is real. It goes beyond the reason, it goes beyond the leap of faith, and it says, Lord, help me. And he marvels.

What of you and me? What we've been called here to do today is to marvel in the midst of our disbelief and doubt and confusion and pursuit of everything earthly, we're called to bring all of that in this place and marvel again, Lord have mercy, help me believe. And here's what we hear. "Descending from the realm of light and life, invading the impenetrable darkness of the kingdom of death and plundering it all of its treasure comes the one who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty,"

Revelation 1:8. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he were dead yet shall he live, and he who lives and believes in me shall never die." He is the Alpha and the Omega and the offspring of David, the bright morning star risen with healing in His wings, wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This is what is declared to us this day. Peter was left marveling that the bright morning star, the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings has been raised victorious over death and sin. So, I ask you this morning, church, this wonderful counselor, this mighty God, this everlasting Father, this Prince of Peace, this bright morning star, what do you believe? May the Holy Spirit, may the risen Christ, may His eternal word greet you this morning with a gospel of grace that will arrest us from looking for the living among the dead and find life in Christ, and not try to suck it out of everything around us. And may He give us new life, not just forgiveness, but new life. Lord Jesus, come and do this. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would meet us this morning. Meet all of us as those who've seen, as those who are waving but we are drowning. And we need you to rescue us even from ourselves. Lord, awaken us to our pursuit of things that cannot bring life and help us to find life in Jesus Christ that then transforms all of life. Lord, help us. Help us to believe. Help us in our unbelief. Meet us by your Spirit. Strengthen us by your word. And give us the hope of glory. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.