

Why Do You Look For the Living Among the Dead?

Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women, were on their way to Jesus' tomb.

They were going there to do what had to be done for Jesus, the last thing that had to be done for Jesus, their final duty for their friend. They were going to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

There hadn't been time to do it when Jesus had died: his body had been taken down from the cross as it was getting dark on Friday night, just as the Sabbath was beginning—and of course on the Sabbath they couldn't do any work, any work of any kind, not even preparing a body for burial. They'd followed Joseph of Arimathea when he'd asked for Jesus' body, and they'd seen the tomb where Joseph had put it, a cave tomb that had a large stone for a door—they'd seen Joseph put the body in the tomb and close it up quickly.

And then they'd gone home. They'd gone home and they'd waited, all through the long silent hours of that Sabbath day—they'd waited alone, all the other disciples having run off to hide—they'd waited afraid, wondering if the Roman guards and temple police were going to come for them, too—they'd waited in shock, their senses dulled, their feelings numbed by the terrible loss, the inconsolable grief of Jesus' death—they'd waited in despair, because the one they had thought would be their Savior had been so easily dispatched, so brutally condemned, so thoroughly defeated by the temple authorities and the Roman overlords and the powers-that-be. They'd sat and they'd waited. There was nothing else to do.

And then, early, very early on the first day of the week, when the dawn was coming up and the Sabbath finally was over, the women gathered the things they had prepared and went to fulfill their final duty: to wash Jesus' body, and anoint it with oils and spices, and wrap it in clean linen cloths, and to lay it to its final rest.

Or so they thought.

Because when they got to the tomb, they discovered that nothing was as they'd expected. The heavy stone door of the tomb was rolled away, and the tomb was open to the morning light, and Jesus was not there: the tomb was empty, and something new was beginning to happen.

And then two angels in dazzling brightness appeared beside them. And the angels asked them a question: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

That question was a challenge to the women—a challenge and an invitation. It was a challenge to remember what Jesus had said, how he had promised that he would be killed and on the third day would rise again—and it was an invitation to believe it could be true. It was a challenge to look beyond the destructive power of crucifixion—and an invitation to trust in the saving power of God's love. It was a challenge to let go of the closed-in feeling of their fear and grief and despair—and an invitation to be opened up to the reality of new life.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angels asked. And that question set the women free, free to look for life—Jesus' life, their life—in the loving life of God.

And that is precisely what they did. They dropped their oils and spices, they forgot their fear and

despair, and they ran back into the city, they rounded up all the hiding disciples, and they told them what they'd seen.

And they were there, hours later, when Peter burst in and said the Lord had appeared to him.

And they were there, later still, when two other disciples, who had been on their way to Emmaus, came running back to say that Jesus had met them on the road and stopped with them at the inn and they'd recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

And they were there when Jesus himself stood before them, and said "Peace be with you," and took their hands in his, and ate and drank with them—and they knew they need never again look for the living among the dead; they knew that their lives too were set free from the dead weight of old sin, old sorrow, old despair, old fear; they knew that their life too was raised to new liveliness in Christ.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angels asked them—and they were set free to seek their life in the loving life of God.

And that very same question is put before us in this Easter Gospel today. We too are challenged to look beyond the ways of death we know only too well—we too are invited to look for new life in the grace of God, following the way of Jesus.

Just as the Crucifixion of Jesus shows us that God is willing to stand with us, even in the depths of our sin, even in the worst of our sorrow, even in the most painful of our sufferings—so the Resurrection of Jesus shows us that God wants us to stand with God, beyond sin and sorrow and suffering, on the other side of pain and brokenness and despair, God wants us to stand with God in the fullness of the light of love that will never let us go.

The Resurrection of Jesus shows us that there is nothing we can break so badly that God cannot heal it in love.

And that means that we can have the strength to look for life where life is truly to be found. Not in the deadly ways of self-centeredness, and greed, and fear, and the need to control, and the anxious desire for security, and that insatiable appetite to make the world bend to our will—but in the life-giving ways that Jesus shows us: compassion, and caring, and fellowship, and working for justice, and striving for peace, and loving our neighbors, and praying for our enemies, and doing good, and healing the oppressed, because God is with us. We are made alive with Christ, our life is gathered with Christ into the deep reality of God; and we need never again look for our living among the dead.

The women came to the tomb on that Easter morning and found it empty. And today, on this Easter morning, we are invited to come to our tombs—the dead places, the closed-in places, the scarred-over places in our lives—old wounds, old hurts, old angers, old guilts, old fears—we are invited to come to our tombs and to find them empty, the old stone rolled away, the darkness open to the morning light, the emptiness bursting with the promise of new life. We are invited to look for our life in the loving life of God.

That is what this day is all about. That is the good news in Christ we celebrate in scripture and song and prayer. That is the communion in Christ we share in bread and wine. That is the joy in Christ that enlivens every "Alleluia!" May the grace of Christ raise each of us to new life this day, and fill us with joy in the promise of the life that is to come. Amen. Alleluia!