

1 Corinthians 15: 19-26
Luke 24: 1-12
March 27, 2016
Easter Sunday

It may shock you that hearing the story of Jesus' rising from the dead has never been the source of great excitement or profound feeling in me. Part of the reason for this is that I have always felt that I *should* feel great joy and amazement and have been disappointed by the gap between what I believe I am *supposed to feel* and what in fact I *do feel*. I identify more with the people in Anne Sexton's poem in their nice clothes and beautiful hats surrounded by beautiful flowers who "are not quite sure." If you feel like me I have good news.

To begin with, notice a few things in Luke's account.

First, the words, joy, happy, glad, elated, ecstatic do not appear at all. The women disciples are "perplexed" by the empty tomb. The word "perplexed" is a nice way of saying they were completely disoriented. There was a massive disconnect between what they expected to find and what in fact they saw.

Before their minds are able to begin finding a way of bring Jesus' death and his empty tomb together they are confronted by two men in dazzling white robes. Luke says they were *terrified*. The Greek word translated here is *emphobos* which at root means to want to flee, to run away in no particular direction, but simply to get away.

Such is the women's terror, however, they cannot run. They are paralyzed. They don't just *bow down* in some formal gesture of humility. *They literally fall on their faces!* It is in this state of terrified prostration that they hear the words "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen. *Remember what he said...*"

The women remember. The words of the angels have reconnected them to the *life* of Jesus, the one they have come to mourn.

This is a critical moment. It is not joyful. It is not happy. It is not life transforming in an ecstatic way. Yet it is the true beginning of the event of resurrection. The power of the resurrection begins when the women are restored to the life of their beloved teacher. They once again hear his words. When we truly hear the words of someone we have lost in a very real way we get them back again. When someone we have loved dies and we can begin to look upon a photograph of their face and can begin again to hear their voice and see the world through their eyes, we begin to be restored to their presence.

And so it is that the women are able to run back to the male disciples and share the news. Once again there is no mention of joy or celebration. Indeed, such is the trauma of Jesus' death that the men are deaf to the witness of the women. They call the report of the women "an idle tale"—literally *feverish ravings*. Luke reports that Peter, at least, runs to the tomb to confirm the women's testimony for himself. Yet he is no more enlightened about what has happened than the women disciples

So my question to myself and to you this morning is simply this: "If the first disciples failed to experience joy and life transforming revelation at the empty tomb, why should we?" In fact, if we can join Anne Sexton's congregation, the Holy Church of the Not Quite Sure, we are on the brink of a life changing journey—not a perpetually happy, joyous one; but a more spacious life where we can breathe and be free of the tyranny of the pressure of the moment.

This morning, I propose to you that the empty tomb invites us to what I will call *an open-ended life*.

In his letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul confronts the belief that death is the final word on life. Death is a fact. Death is a limitation we share with all creation. All creation has no problem with this. No creature other than man and woman experiences angst about dying. When our cat, Moxie's time comes, she will not experience death as an enemy. She is not burdened by anxiety about her mortality. I am the one who struggles with this. I am the one who wonders about the meaning of life and if my life matters. I can jump and shout about Jesus being risen from the dead all I want; but deep down in the shadowy abyss of my soul there whispers an insidious message. "Soon it will all be over and what did you accomplish? What did it all mean?"

Go to any religious or philosophical system or school of psychology and you will find that the fundamental question of meaning in life hinges on our understanding of death. Paul clearly is aware that there are voices which mock the Corinthians' belief that Christ rose from the dead. Their arguments were no different then, than they are today. The idea of someone dying and returning to life, at best, is a pleasant fantasy and, at worst, a cruel and superstitious delusion. Death is the great period at the end of the sentence of life.

Paul does not dispute the fact of death. What he disputes is that life is merely a material fact we share with all creation; and that we should simply resign ourselves to the impersonal cycle of birth, growth, decline and death. Those who are certain that there is no life beyond death see the idea of eternal life as being a sign of denial of death. Such is our denial that we have created this dying and rising savior to dull our fears, a kind of spiritual morphine injection to alleviate the pain of reality.

Paul says that if these critics are correct we—Paul and the Corinthian Christians—“are of all people most to be pitied.” After all if Jesus did not rise from the dead then our materialist critics are right. We are participating in a great delusion. We are robbing people of the hard but real experience of actual life. Not only are we to be pitied, we are justly opposed and should be stamped out for if in fact God—if there is a God—did not raise Jesus from the dead then we are actually harming the world with our false vision of life.

Yet Paul proclaims, in the teeth of all this so called evidence that Christ *is* risen from the dead. He *will* reign in the human heart until all that opposes his boundless life is put into submission. I interpret this to mean that all creation will come into line with life’s openness and spaciousness. Paul announces that the last such enemy will be death itself. Not that death will be eliminated. Death will continue to be a fact of life. But death will find its proper relationship to life. Death will no longer point to meaninglessness and futility. Death now points to the fact that life is a continuing song that sings above and within mortality.

In short, Christ’s resurrection from the dead proclaims that life is open ended. There is no absolute end point. We are not determined by where we were born, where we went to school, what good or bad decisions we have made. We are made to praise the God who gave us life.

To believe that Jesus in fact *really did die* and *really did rise from the dead* is to know in the depths of our hearts that there is life on the other side of every failure, conflict, disappointment and sorrow. To believe that we are meant to share in that resurrection power is to notice how many places in our lives we treat as empty tombs; to notice indeed how often we treat our lives as if Christ is absent and has no power to lift us up. In fact, as the angels

demonstrate to the women disciples, every empty place is full of heaven if we have the faith and trust recognize it.

Friends, I urge you this morning to ask God to overcome all in you that believes that this life is all that there is. I plead with you to reject the lie that the outcome of your life is already determined. Come to believe that you are meant to live not in a closed life of rigid cause and effect. Instead I invite you to begin the journey of an open ended life. A life so open ended that death itself is now a witness to eternity. Amen.