

“Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?”

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12

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Well, you have to admit—it sure is a strange way to announce the greatest good news ever.

I mean, here are these two heavenly messengers with the opportunity to *comfort* these grief-stricken women;

these dutiful women who have come to the tomb to finish preparing the body of Jesus for burial.

And it's a chance not just to help them feel better; it's news that should blow the socks off of them:

Alleluia, Christ is *risen!!* Life and death will never be the same!

Cue the trumpets, bring in the lilies, Hallelujah Chorus, #eternal life!

But instead, the first thing the women hear out of the mouths of these two angels is a snarky-sounding question:

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

(And then, almost as an afterthought, “he is not here; he is risen.” Then they go on to lecture the women by asking “why didn't you *get* this when he tried to tell you how it was going to go down?”)

Whoa! I don't know about you, but it seems to me that the Holy One surely could have sent a more diplomatic pair of messengers

Because, let's face it: Nobody likes to be scolded

—especially when your heart is heavy over the death of someone you love.

And when you feel that your life will never be the same again, it must be especially hard to take when suddenly the body is missing and in its place are these two guys whom you've never seen before, and they're *fussing* at you for looking in the wrong place and for not remembering how he tried to explain all this to you back before he was crucified!

After all, scolding never seems to accomplish what is intended. Whether you're a parent trying to keep your son from making rude noises, or a pastor using the Easter sermon to prod folks for only showing up on this one Sunday, scolding more or less amounts to saying, “Why won't you act as *I need* you to act?”

And to lay it on these faithful women who have staggered through their grief in order to come to the tomb and finish the burial procedures? It just seems like cruel and unusual punishment.

But I have a question for you this morning.

What if the angels in this story are not so much like that mean nun who taught you in third grade (you know, the one who kept rapping your knuckles with a ruler)? What if they are more like, say ... the late Mr. Rogers?

What if their words to the women are not intended as scolding, but are more like ol' Fred's loving, constructive guidance after he puts on his sweater and invites you to be his neighbor?

Could it be that these divine messengers are concerned not so much with shaming, but rather with *opening the eyes* of those who grieve over Jesus?

What if this question, "Why do you look for the living among the dead," is intoned not with disapproval but with *compassion* for people who are blinded both by grief *and* by lack of spiritual imagination?

Because the fact is that *none* of the resurrection accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) come equipped with a user's manual that explains exactly what the resurrection is supposed to mean for you and me.

Which may explain why in all four accounts, the news that "Christ Has Risen" is met more with *puzzlement and uneasiness* than with instantaneous joyful celebration.

You see, we've had the benefit of 20 centuries to try to figure it out, with assists from the Apostle Paul and St. Augustine, [and] Billy Graham [or] Barbara Brown Taylor. By now we know the message that death is not the final word; the message that Christ has opened up life beyond the grave.

Yet, *you* may be someone who dutifully comes to church on Easter and hears that message, and maybe you believe it, but you just can't get your head around what difference the resurrection makes for your life *here and now.*"

Some years ago I was leading a discussion with a group of college students. We got onto the topic of how things might be different if the resurrection of Jesus was a provable fact rather than an article of faith. Someone asked, "How many of those people who are indifferent to the life of faith would lead very different lives if they knew for certain that Jesus had been raised from the dead?"

One freshman woman, wise beyond her years, raised her hand and said, "I'm pretty sure that my roommate believes in the resurrection and life after death, but as far as I can tell it is no different for her than believing that this table is made of wood or that water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit. I can't tell that it makes any real difference in her life."

Well, that's why I'm so glad that Luke records *this* question from the angels:

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

You see, when the scriptures refer to 'life' or 'death', they are not always talking about a biological state. More often than not, 'life' and 'death' are *spiritual* conditions.

That which is 'dead' is that which is cut off from God, destined to decay because it has no redeeming qualities, no long-term ability to nurture us.

Whereas that which is 'living' is that which taps into the very core of goodness and renewal. It comes from God and leads to God, the source and giver of life.

So when the angels ask, "Why do you look for the living among the dead", they are really conveying *two* things. First, it *is* a clever way of announcing, by implication, that Christ has risen.

But second, it is a *rhetorical question* about the vitality of your spiritual life: "Why do you look for life among things that cannot give you true fulfillment, things that lead to spiritual death?"

Decades ago a country-pop crossover hit served as the theme song for the movie, *Urban Cowboy*. Google the YouTube video, and you will see a cowboy wannabe cruising the Texas honky tonk scene, looking for a hook-up, while the [nasal] voice of a singer named Johnny Lee Jones intones, "Lookin' for love in all the wrong places, lookin' for love in too many faces ..."

Now, I doubt that the writer of that song, sitting there in Austin or Nashville, had any notion of making a biblical allusion. But intended or not, this song channels the angels' question in Luke.

And two or three years ago, a writer in *Christian Century* asked a similar question: "Why do you give the best of yourself to things that can never love you back?" (Emily C. Heath, Vol. 133, No.4, p.18).

So what are some of those wrong places that *you* go looking for life; places that turn out to be dead ends, filled with decay and dying? Bigger cars and houses? Romantic adventurism? Needing to make someone else wrong in order to feel better about yourself?

Let's don't ruin Easter by trying to make an exhaustive list. But here's at least one more, hiding right in plain sight, in this account from Luke: the *sexism* of the male disciples, who have to go put their own stamp of acknowledgment on the empty tomb because they can't accept the word of the women.

Looking for life in practices filled with decay and death.

And when the scriptures speak of choosing life over death, here's a bonus: When Jesus triumphs over death, he also defeats all those lesser things that keep human life from being all that it could be—things like poverty, disease, or child abuse. His resurrection breaks the stranglehold that cancer or a lost job or the wrong election outcome can have on your life.

That's why I want to nominate this question—"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"--as one of a handful of biblical verses that are sometimes referred to as 'the gospel within the gospel.' These are verses that, in just a few words, seem to sum up the entire biblical message.

Some do it as a proclamation, such as John 3:16, "For God so loved the world ..."; others do it as a command, such as Moses in Deuteronomy, "today I place before you life and good, death and evil, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life." (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19).

But the angels' question in Luke 24 does it as a *rhetorical question*—that is, a question that implies its own answer: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” And in so doing, it encapsulates the whole of biblical faith.

Maybe what it all boils down to is that unpredictable relationship between questions and answers. Often an answer doesn't make a lot of sense if we don't know what the question was in the first place.

So on *this* Easter morning, even among our glad cries of “Alleluia, Christ is Risen,” the angels continue to ask the question that started it all: (say it with me), “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Will you pray with me ...

In your rising, O Lord, you invite us to new life. In pursuing the angels' question, guide us to find our way there.