



April 8, 2007
Easter

Luke 24:1-12
Leaving the Dead
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Well, in case you missed it, today is Easter. And I have a hunch that you know what I want to talk about. As a man said after worship, "Reverend, you must be in a rut. I only come once a year at Easter, and it's always the same message." Well, the question isn't, "Is the Easter message new?" The question is, "Has it yet changed the way you live?"

Our text today in Luke 24 begins with the word, "But." It's a strange way to begin a chapter, I know. But you always want to pay close attention to the little word "but" in the Bible. Luke, Chapter 23 ends with Joseph of Arimathea wrapping up Jesus' dead body and placing it in a tomb. Everybody thought that was the end of the story. It is how we always think about death. We assume that we're to get all we can out of life before it is over, and the ending is always the same - death. Everybody knows that. That's just how it is. "But," there is another chapter. Chapter 24 begins with "But," "However," "Nevertheless." These are the words that signal a sacred intrusion into the way it is.

But on the first day of the week, at dawn, the women came to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus. They brought with them some spices to keep his dead, decaying body from stinking. It isn't a very attractive image is it? Death never is. That's why even though we all know about it, we try hard not to think about death. If you have ever cared for someone who is dying, you know that in the end, life is usually not pretty, sometimes bloated, often bald, and it always smells bad. As disturbing as those images are to us, the real reason we prefer not to think about death and dying is that it tears apart our illusions of control. It doesn't matter how wonderful we are, death still comes in the end. And not just the death of our bodies, but also of our good times, achievements, and dreams along the way.

But on the first day of the week, at dawn, the women came to the tomb and found it empty. Luke tells us that left them "perplexed" - another sign of sacred intrusion. Then they saw two men in dazzling garments beside them, and they were "terrified," which is the Bible's favorite word for sacred intrusion. The women fell with their faces to the ground. Usually the next line of the Bible is that the angel says, "Fear not." But according to Luke, these angels don't say that. Instead they say something that is worthy of fear.

This is how the Easter story begins. It does not restore our illusions of controlling life. To the contrary, it claims there is less control than we think. Easter claims we don't do the best we can with life on our own, then we die and enter some vaguely described place called heaven. Easter claims that's not real life at all. It's just avoiding death as long as possible, which is never the same thing as living.

But what if the tomb of Jesus is empty? That would be perplexing. And what if a messenger from God told you that Jesus was risen from the dead? — which is exactly what the angelic Gospel says to you today. That would be terrifying because it would completely overhaul your mission in life. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angel asks. "He is not here, but has risen."

It is amazing how much of our understanding of life's mission boils down to looking for a life among the dead. We devote an enormous number of hours to making the best career moves we can knowing that no matter how successful we become, our careers still end with us having to leave while other scavenge our old office for treasures. We knock ourselves out to be extraordinary parents knowing that if we do a great job, our kids will leave to find their own lives, and we'll sit at home wondering why they don't call. We throw ourselves into projects and

volunteerism that we believe are of great importance knowing that a day will come when someone takes over for us and changes everything we have built. And we tell ourselves that's just the way it is. The best we think that we can do is to make a difference while we are on stage. Isn't that really just anointing the dead? Aren't we just trying to keep our performance from stinking and hoping that there will be a good word about our legacy from someone? Isn't there more than that?

But what if we could stop looking for life among the dead where everything is given back? What if we could begin eternal life, right now, today, here on earth? Then our life's mission would be dramatically changed. And the biggest change is that we would be fearless.

It is fear that makes us obsess over our careers, pressure our kids to be perfect, and fantasize about how the next diet plan will make our lives beautiful. And the fear behind all of these missions is that we are on our own to get life right. But Easter proclaims that life is an eternal gift from God.

We have been taught to think horizontally: live as many years as possible, then die. Keep a job or relationship as long as possible, then lose it. But the Bible teaches us to think vertically. It claims that life breaks in from above, it belongs to God, and it is always lived in his hands. Death is just a passage into even more life, but it is more of the life we can have today.

It is terrifying to give up control of your life and place it and everything you care about into the hands of God. I know. But unless you fear Easter, you will always fear everything else as just something else to lose.

When you have been to this empty tomb, and received the new, eternal life Christ was dying to provide, it doesn't change the need to work, raise children, and do a good job with life. But it does alter your mission in all of this. No longer is the mission about achieving and controlling. Now the daily mission is to receive the mystery of life unfolding before you. No longer do you cling to that which you will inevitably lose. Now life is conducted with open hands into which blessings can be placed, and when they are taken away, it is only so new blessings can be placed there as well. No longer do you complain about what is not good enough. Now your constant companion in life is gratitude for what has come to you from above. But all of that cannot begin until you start to live vertically.

My grandmother was comfortable around death because she saw it everywhere on her farm. But she was unafraid of it because she long ago chose to live her life vertically. I think that was why she freely accepted her imperfect body. She was a large woman and didn't care. Anytime she outgrew a dress, she just sewed a new panel into the skirt - usually with a different print. If her new shoes hurt her, she would cut a hole in the part that didn't feel good. Since she was freed from the anxieties that typically plague us, she could devote herself to things that mattered. These included eternal things like cherishing God and her family, her grandchildren, her church, and fishing. My grandma loved to fish. In all of the pictures we have of her, she's holding fish - including a wedding picture. I remember seeing her pull a trout out of a stream once and saying, "Craig, you'll never see anything this beautiful again." I hope you'll find something more beautiful than fish to behold in life. But I got her point. We'll never be able to behold any of the beauty of life as long as we are stressed.

The beauty from heaven is all around us, breaking into every day: the song of the morning bird who praises God for the gift of another day. The magnificent concerto that plays on the radio as you drive to work. The colleague who plops down in your office and asks, "Are you okay?" The old woman who stops her shuffle down the sidewalk, looks up from her walker, and smiles at you. The gentle hug of a small child who says, "Goodnight, I love you." Which of those things did you earn? Which do you control? Even the Spring snow is a beautiful reminder that we live by forces beyond our control. But because we are so anxiously devoted to the wrong mission of trying to prevent loss, we miss all of the beauty. About this I am certain - no one who is anxious can enjoy beauty.

How do we stop anxiously looking for the living among the dead? How do we learn to find things like beauty and a life that can be truly enjoyed because we are no longer afraid? The same way my grandmother did. The same way the women at the tomb did. The same way every disciple eventually does. Only by encountering the risen Savior.

It isn't enough to hear my words. It isn't even enough to hear the words of angels. No one in the Bible believed Jesus was risen simply because they heard about it. They all had to have some sacred encounter with the risen Christ themselves. And that is what the Holy Spirit now makes available to you.

When Luke describes the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, the scenes are striking only because they are so ordinary. One time he appears along the road as two men are walking to the town of Emmaus. Another time he appeared to the eleven disciples and asked them if it wasn't time for dinner. That is how the risen Christ will appear to you as well. He breaks into the ordinary making it extraordinary, because that is what the resurrection is - God's breaking into ordinary life.

Now we come to your chapter in this saving drama. Will you join those who have gone before you in giving to Jesus the life you can't keep to receive a new life you can never lose? Will the resurrection break through again? It is really up to you. After the first Easter, God has already made it clear that new life is possible.

But you have to stop looking for life among the dead.

Benediction: *Life - that is what Easter promises. Life that you cannot control, and, thus, life that you cannot lose. The grace of our risen Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you, Amen.*