

“THE GIVER OF LIFE”

Luke 24:1–12 (NRSV)

¹ But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

That is the traditional Easter acclamation with which the church has celebrated the resurrection of Jesus for centuries; an acclamation that gives voice to our faith in a life-giving God.

But this acclamation wasn't on the hearts and minds, let alone lips, of that whole company of women who headed to the tomb that first Easter morning.

No. They came with heavy hearts and broken dreams expecting to find their friends beaten and battered body. They expected to find evidence of the brutality of the Roman Empire and the finality of death that had sealed Jesus in the tomb. And so, they brought with them spices and ointments for what was to be their final act of love and devotion to Jesus. They came to anoint and prepare his body for a proper burial. They didn't expect resurrection. They didn't expect new life.

But as they approached the tomb, they found the stone rolled away. And when they entered the tomb, Jesus' body wasn't there. And, as Luke says, they were perplexed. They didn't know what to make of it. There was a disconnect between the reality they expected to find and the reality that they discovered.

And that's when the angels appear, two of them, in clothes of dazzling white reminiscent of the transfiguration. And of course, the women are terrified and bow their faces to the ground. They are in the presence of heavenly beings.

Now what's most interesting to me about this story in the gospel of Luke is not the angels themselves, but their message. They serve as God's messengers; that's what the word angel means.

In Matthew and Mark, the angels basically say the same thing: "Do not be afraid, you seek Jesus who was crucified. He has risen." But here in Luke, instead of saying "Do not be afraid," the angels ask a question; a troubling question; a question that doesn't really expect an answer, but tries to make a point. They ask: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

It's almost as if the angels are saying, "Jesus told you that this would happen. Didn't you trust him? Didn't you believe him? Don't you believe in the power of God? Don't you believe in the faithfulness of God? Don't you believe that the same God whose Spirit was at work in and through Jesus as he went around teaching and healing and bringing new life to others *and to you* is the same God who promised to raise him

and all of creation to new life; that promised to set him and all of creation free from the power of sin and death? So why don't you believe? What Jesus said was true. It has happened." They say, "He's not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again." Well, he is alive.

The women went to the tomb expecting to find their dead friend's body, instead they found faith.

Do we believe the story of the resurrection? What goes through our minds when we hear those words, "He is risen!" Is it astonishment? Or is it skepticism? If we're honest, even those of us with the strongest of faith in God must admit that there's still a part of us that questions how this can be true?

And we're not alone in that. When the women return and share the news with the apostles, those carefully handpicked close companions of Jesus, they too thought it was "fake news" or merely an "idle tale". But "Idle tale" isn't the best translation of the Greek word Luke uses to describe the apostles' characterization of the women's testimony. "ἄηρος" the Greek word used here, is at the root of our word "delirious."

And so, what the men were really saying was that the women were out of their minds, crazy, spouting nonsense; all the men, of course, except Peter.

What is his response? He runs to the tomb. The last time we saw Peter in Luke's gospel he had just finished denying being one of Jesus' disciples for the third time. And Jesus turned and looked at him and he remembered how Jesus had predicted his three denials, and full of guilt, he turns and leaves and weeps bitterly.

Peter learned something about Jesus' predictions that day. And so, his curiosity was peaked. He had to see for himself. He gets to the tomb, stoops down, looks in, and sees the linen cloths laying there by themselves. And so, what does he do next? He goes home, amazed at what had happened. Peter believes.

Peter doesn't go to the tomb to look for the living among the dead. Peter goes to the tomb to confirm that Jesus isn't there; that Jesus is alive again, that the power of God was truly on Jesus' side; that God's love was stronger than the evil perpetrated on his innocent friend; that God's sentence of life was more powerful than Pilate's sentence of death. He

went to see if Jesus had truly conquered sin and death and evil. And when he sees that Jesus isn't there, he goes home amazed.

Do you share that amazement? Do we trust his witness? Do we trust the witness of these woman? I'll admit, I still have my doubts sometimes.

But one thing that gives me hope, one thing that gives me encouragement, one thing that gives me confidence and makes me want to run with Peter to the empty tomb to see for myself, is my belief that there really is a God out there bringing new life and new possibilities to people like you and me. That is what is amazing to me. There is a God out there and in here, and all around us, whose Spirit is at work, calling us to a better way, wanting to redeem our brokenness, wanting to heal our souls and our relationships, wanting to help us experience life to the full. In all my years, I have seen resurrection life enter places that I thought were dead; situations and circumstances where there was little or no hope for life; often tombs of our own creation. But then the Spirit moved and stones were rolled away. Seeds were planted and began to grow and new life sprung forth. And in those moments, the only explanation I have is that it is a God thing!

In our despair, in our hopelessness, we catch glimpses, we see signs of possibility, we see signs of new life. And that is God at work.

And so, what if, instead of turning to the self-help section of Barnes and Noble, or instead of turning to the advice of “friends” on social media, we were to turn to the One who frequently does the unexpected, the unexplainable? What if we turned and put our trust in the One who loves us and wants what is best for us, the One who has the power to bring new life, to bring about reconciliation, to make things new, the One we call the author and giver of life?

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.