

Wanted: Dead or Alive (Easter 2019) Luke 24:1-12

I was wondering about my place, about our places in this Easter Bible reading.

It may seem egotistical, but I think of my outfit for worship as pretty dazzling clothes. And if I invite John Rowe in his sport coat and necktie to stand up here with me, then we'd be two men in dazzling clothes! Since I'm stationed to deliver a message about resurrection, I can make the leap to picture us like those greeters in the reading.

It doesn't call those two men angels, so we could probably just picture a coupla schnazzy dressers hanging around the cemetery Sunday morning with gossip, except the actual word isn't just schnazzy or dazzling, but—even flashier—that *their* clothes looked like "lightning." I can't claim that, and neither can John. Maybe it involves more sequins? I guess you can sit down.

Continuing to look for our place in the reading, I then notice the women. These faithful women had been with Jesus since early in the story, aiding him, evidently wealthy enough to support him and his entourage.

As followers, they were there for his teaching, healing the sick, helping the poor, had been with him to feast and celebrate, through confusions and confrontations, radical inclusions and shocking expectations. They traveled with him as his face was set to Jerusalem, were with the multitude who acclaimed Jesus as a king of peace when he arrived last Sunday, with him at his last supper, as he was betrayed, arrested, condemned, demeaned, as he was crucified, died, and was buried.

That's plenty of experience for these faithful women. They faced some daunting challenges, some daring mission, some horrible sadness, and now some creepy mystery. They've faced a lot, yet nevertheless they persisted.

After the tragedy, after goodbye, after loss and death, this morning they were no longer able to provide for Jesus' needs, but at least to show the right respect to his corpse.

I figure they align with dedicated women, and a few non-women, here today, who have persisted

through life's ups and downs, sorrows and joys, through all the demands that come, striving to respond and meet them faithfully, as you are eager to do what's right, as you want to be close to God.

Unfortunately, those women weren't trusted and ended up sidelined, along with the shocking news they came to bear. The deeply egalitarian early church went on succumbing to neglect the goodness of this good news from faithfully apostolic women and instead ossified back into corrupting powers of patriarchal society, from which God's Spirit is still trying to resuscitate us, call us out from deadly harm, so we, too, rise again, renewed for life in right relationship.

That tragic, failing edge, falling back to deadly ways makes me look for our place in the story neither with me and John cast as flashy angelic heralds, nor with our women who keep on keeping on, tenaciously continuing through life's story.

We had the best news, the most incredible belief, liberating us for the sake of life that could not be stopped, and yet we somehow fell through and failed at it and kept backsliding and couldn't break free. We give in to the ungodly. That makes me believe that our place in the story is with the dead.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" those dazzling messengers prompted outside of the tomb.

We must admit we draw these lines with self-confidence, never comprehending we could be wrong. We immediately say it's either/or, dead or alive. In a cemetery, you claim your category simply by which side of the grass you're on. I'd bet every one of you wants to tally yourself in the living column. Who here is alive?

Yet we begin to recognize it's not so clear-cut or obvious.

This week there was an NPR story about pig brains.* (Not to nauseate you before ham lunch.) Scientists got pig heads from a slaughterhouse. We start with our unambiguous decision: severed pork skulls, living or dead? Dead! And yet the

* <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/04/17/714289322/scientists-restore-some-function-in-the-brains-of-dead-pigs>

scientists pumped in a chemical cocktail of anti-seizure meds and ten hours after those cloven-hoofed cleaved-off craniums were officially dead, electrical signals kept sparking.

The story said, “The implications of this study have staggered ethicists, as they contemplate how this research... fits into the current understanding of what separates the living from the dead.” Because NPR is a classy outfit, they had the good taste to include a *Princess Bride* quote: “There’s a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive.”

Now, I think that’s pretty cool research. But I’m not here for the details about it. I’m not here to tally what counts as all dead. I’m not here for the ethical conundrums. I’m not even here for good movie lines. And I’m certainly not trying to prove that Jesus, crucified and laid in the tomb, was not just “mostly dead” before he was alive again.

What struck me with this news story and the cutting-edge (butcher pun intended) research, is the element of surprise about what separates the living from the dead and questions of life vs. death. Those are old issues for us who come to church, especially during this Holy Week. We’ve known the blurriness of those lines all along, and known where we stand. Or perhaps lie. “We have been crucified with Christ, buried by baptism into death,” the early church proclaimed.

The lightning ambassadors at the tomb asked, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” To be honest, those faithful women weren’t looking for the living among the dead. They were expecting to find *the dead* among the dead. They thought they were alive, but that Jesus was firmly and forever removed from that category into the classification of dead. Period. Solid stop.

But Jesus undid that equation, not only for himself but for those women at the tomb seeking death, and for all of us, trapped in death and captive to its clutches. It’s an odd phrase for the standard framework, but here’s the truth: Jesus used to be dead. He isn’t anymore. You, too, *used to be* dead. No longer confined in the tomb, no

longer finalized in death, no longer ended, no longer subject to the empire, no longer constrained by oppressions, no longer even trying to define the days by duties to do or how to avoid death as long as possible.

Jesus has stepped from the other side of our imaginary line, and left us realizing the line isn’t so clear as we name in statistics or in our scaredness and scarcity.

Why look for the living among the dead? Because that’s where Jesus comes to find us. He brings his life everywhere we’re entombed and doomed by death.

Yes, absolutely, this means the biggest thing: that death is not the end. That’s why our early service began in the memorial garden sharing communion. We are still and ever the communion of saints. The full graves and empty spots at our tables aren’t really the permanent reality. There is reunion feast and life to come. Separation is not final. Death does not last. Life is final and forever!

Still, this isn’t a hope on hold, a recourse only for what were allegedly last moments. If it’s about reunion beyond death, not just about one empty tomb long ago, but every final resting place becoming a mere rest stop on the way to fully renewed relationships, then it’s also about the so-called dead ends now, when things seem to be over. This must mean reconciliation, possibility, new beginnings, healing not just of fractured and failing bodies but of our interactions.

Sometimes that may hit close to home, like in your house, which may even feel like its own tomb needing new life. But it’s also much more rampant, running across this world, against a sense of helplessness or hopelessness. Besides death creeping into our bodies and lives, we feel despair in these days declared dark, that we’re worried, attacked, captive to trauma in each headline, with the inescapable harms inflicted on the planet through systems we can’t seem to do anything about.

In another death this week that was not quite ultimate, I kept reading that the burning of Notre Dame was sad because we needed a good,

beautiful place like that when the world seems such a bad, ugly place. I have to say, that feels a like looking for the living among the living, as if God is someplace separate from this world, as if we need an escape room, to flee our reality in order to have good or find God.

But Jesus comes into and through death to share life. So maybe Jesus is not looking to be shut behind the stone, re-buried in our buildings, but instead wants to be out roaming and rambling on behalf of life, showing up in memorial gardens and hospitals and in detention centers and during despair and depression, against destruction and domination. He's in this service of a memorial meal in confusing communion, but also at your lunch table agitations and somber fearfulness that awaits Monday and Tuesday and each day.

Why do you look for the living among the dead? You think you'll find life by turning over each secret stone? This isn't about your hunts and searching. I'm sorry, but this isn't about the road to recovery or your path to success or pursuit of happiness or seeking the meaning of life or spiritual direction. Those only contend with death. And all your looking won't provide a way out, while it also ignores the greater truth.

You come here to remember the words of Jesus, what he told you. That's what the flashy messengers mention. We look back to look forward. As you're looking forward to leaving here, you don't go out with something to do, to chase after. You go out free. You go with confidence, with faith. You may go out with joy. Because Jesus is on the loose to find you, and he leaves no stone unturned or unrolled away. You go out to live, to life, alive. The one who always looks among the dead finds you to give you life.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!