

<Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 114:1-8; Luke 24:1-12>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

I still remember the first funeral I went to, though as you might imagine, I was young enough that I didn't fully grasp all that was going on. It was for my step-grandfather, and while I didn't fully grasp the extent of what the funeral service meant, I knew that Elmer was no longer with us in life. But what I truly remember, especially from the perspective of childhood, is that the walk to the front pews of the church felt like a very long walk, and that my family and I were the only ones making that walk at the time. I wouldn't be surprised if many of you have had a similar experience at some point in your lives.

This is probably as close as any of us are going to get to understanding the feelings and perspectives of the women - Mary, Mary, Martha, Salome - as they prepared themselves to go about their work of preparing Jesus' body for burial. Following the crucifixion, as it was the eve of the Sabbath, Jesus was first placed temporarily in a tomb to keep his body safe before they could go about their preparations. And now, as they prepare the spices and oils used for the burial process, I imagine that their mindset was one similar to what we have experienced when a loved one dies: the abstract reality that our loved one is dead and no longer with us in life, the disconnect of trying to make sense of an insensible situation, and feeling that the walk before you is one of the longest, loneliest ones you'll ever face. Such is the state and sense of the early hours of this Sunday morning.

Culturally, we struggle with death - trying to understand it, trying to predict it, trying to inculcate ourselves from it. Despite all our efforts, death still eludes and evades our understanding. And if we struggle this much, still, with death, how much more so we wrestle with the reality and promise of resurrection. From a professional perspective as a pastor, I have to confess: it can be challenging to reinterpret such a familiar story in a new way for today's day and age. But before I comment further on that, I would tell you a story.

There was once a boy in a Sunday School class at church, about 8 years old, named Stephen. In almost every respect, Stephen was the same as any other child his age, but he tended to have a different way of looking at the world which sometimes saw him on the edges of the class, rather than in among all his classmates. One year, when Easter came around, the teacher held a "reverse Easter egg hunt." Giving each student an empty plastic egg, the teacher encouraged the kids to go out and find a sign of spring and new life, and put it in the egg to share with the rest of the class.

After everyone came back from running around outside, they began opening all the eggs to share what they had found: a flower, a leaf, etc. When they came to Stephen's turn, he opened his egg to show...nothing. His egg was empty. At first his classmates derided him for not doing the assignment, or not understanding it. But he maintained his

composure and calmly explained that, since the tomb was empty on Easter, and that was a sign of Jesus' living, his egg was also empty to show new life.

Not only was that a wonderful example of spring and new life, that moment was the turning point of Stephen's relationship with his other classmates; from that time on, he was never on the edges or the margins of the class again.

It's a classic, and perhaps even unsurprising story for this day. And that, actually, is precisely what we need in this day and age. Rather than trying to re-tell or reinterpret Easter in some fresh or innovative new way, what we need most - given the uncertainty and the upheaval of this day and age - what we need most is a familiar and time-tested story to ground us and frame our perspective as we live as disciples.

Because, in truth, the realities of the world have not changed all that much from the time this chapter of the story came into fruition and realization. Empires have risen and fallen; conflicts have sprung up and peace has taken root again; people go about their daily routines of work and family and friendships, as well as the struggles and stresses of those daily routines. None of that is new or surprising. And if the dynamics of our world, including the specter and shade of death, continue to be ever-present, then so, too, is this story which not only grounds us in our faith but directs us in our living. Even when this particular day and age in which we live feels particularly unique to us.

But that's not to say that this old story, this grounding and foundational story, can just be lifted up on this one day and then packaged neatly away until Easter of next year.

Celebrating Easter, and coming together to bear witness - again - to Jesus' resurrection, begs of us the question: whom do we follow? When life is turned upside down, and the way forward seems uncertain...whom do we follow? When faced by death and the specter of loss...whom do we follow? When challenged by worldly powers that seek to consolidate power and authority at the expense of those in need...whom do we follow? Or, to frame it in the question of the angels, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

You see, to face uncertainty and loss and powers of this world is to face death, and yet we seek, we search for the only One who can offer us Life; and he is no longer to be found among the dead. Jesus is alive, and so too are we; and to follow Jesus is to follow the promise of resurrection, the promise of Life. We can no longer look for the living and expect to find them among the dead, for Jesus has now gone ahead of us to show us the way into the fullness of Life and living, an example which we are to emulate in our daily comings and goings. And for as much as we yearn for this, that can be a mystifying and terrifying thing at the same time.

"In order to do what the angels have told [the women and the disciples], everything must change. But it doesn't change into something unfamiliar: the change is built on what Jesus himself told them, what they need to remember and believe. The pieces all fall

into place and they “get it.” By getting it, they are given a new purpose, a new direction for their lives; they have become disciples of a resurrected-death-conquering God now.

“Move from death to life... look for life where you know it will be found. Stop looking for life among things that are dead. This is the only way to have new life with Christ. The journey does not stop at the cross, neither God’s nor ours. Dying is necessary, but choosing to live for God is even more so. This is the great turning point.”\* And this turning point informs all of our living.

There’s more to Stephen’s story that I didn’t share with you earlier. Stephen, unfortunately for those who loved him, was born with a severe auto-immune deficiency. And so, at a too-young age, he developed an illness from which he could not recover. He died. And in the midst of grief, as family and friends and people from church gathered to celebrate his short but powerful life, his Sunday School classmates showed up to bear witness to the resurrection. As they arrived to the church, they gathered together and then, as one group, went to the front and laid out a bunch of plastic eggs, each one empty, to symbolize new life in the world. As they wrestled with the dynamic that Stephen was dead, as they faced their own “long walk” to the front of the sanctuary, they let themselves be guided not by isolation or confusion, but by Stephen’s example. Stephen’s life, and his perspective, gave them the ability to choose who they were going to follow, and where they would look to find life anew, the promise of resurrection, anew.

Why do you look for the living among the dead? And whom are you going to follow? On this Easter Sunday, as we proclaim again and reclaim anew the story of the resurrection, this is our question. As we face the world, with all its strife and conflict and suffering and need, this is our question. And as we ponder what to do, this is our question. The answer will lead us forward in our journey to Life, and it will be a life which is never undone. To that, we raise our “Alleluias” and rejoice. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*

\*Chelsey Harmon, Center for Excellence in Preaching