

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter C; 21 April 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Why do you seek the living among the dead?

In nomine...

I. Intro

The angels asked them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

A message from our Bishop this morning included this quote from Jürgen Moltmann, published about 15 years ago:

The resurrection faith is not proved true by means of historical evidence, or only in the next world. It is proved here and now, through the courage for revolt, the protest against deadly powers, and the self-giving of men and women for the victory of life. It is impossible to talk convincingly about Christ’s resurrection without participating in the movement of the Spirit ‘who descends on all flesh’ to quicken it.... So resurrection means rebirth out of impotence and indolence to the ‘living hope,’ And today, ‘living hope’ means a passion for life, and a lived protest against death. (“The Feast of Freedom” found in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2003, 368-369))

This message came to me in stark contrast to the newscast I listened to on the radio this morning:

Yesterday in Colombo, Sri Lanka and nearby communities, even as we here in Glassboro were celebrating with joy the Great Vigil of Easter, members of three churches: St. Anthony’s, St. Sebastian’s, and Zion Church searched for the living among the dead after bomb attacks in each community.

Yesterday in Columbine, Colorado, communities looked for the living among the dead as they remembered the attack upon the high school there 20 years ago that killed 13 people. Who knew, then, that that attack would mark the beginning of an era of high-profile mass shootings, particularly in schools?

And so all these stories played in my head as I ate my breakfast this Easter morning. Which was most defining? How do I hold them all together? Where is God in this?

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II. Thesis

In our Gospel account today, some of Jesus’ friends go to the tomb where Jesus was laid following his crucifixion. They’re there to finish off the burial rites, to do final honors to Jesus’ body and to let go of the life that had so profoundly impacted theirs. That’s what we do at funerals! These were not naive young people. They were mature women who had seen plenty of death in their life and they knew exactly what to expect, and what was expected of them. These women were seeking closure.

But when these women, Mary, Joanna, another Mary, and their friends, got to the tomb, something unexpected happened. They didn’t know what to make of it. Because, all of a sudden, life was going off the rails. Everything they knew, everything their families had known for unceasing generations, was about to be called into question.

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And they discovered there were two stories at work: the one with which they were familiar, the story where death always has the final word. And another story, one which Jesus had begun telling them over the past few years.

What Mary and Joanna and Mary and their companions had been seeking, what they heard Jesus promising them, was life, living. That’s why they had followed Jesus: they sought the living. They sought those ideas, those words, those patterns of life that would give them life and redeem their lives from being entrapped by a world that could sometimes be deadening and death-dealing, especially to women and the poor: to those without economic or political or other cultural power. They sought meaning. They sought ways of living that would bring them joy and bring healing to the world around them. Jesus embodied all these things for them. He proclaimed their dreams aloud and declared that they were coming to pass. Jesus described for

them the Kingdom of Heaven, the reality that is present and more real than what culture has trained your eyes to see for all these years.

Enlightenment was not about seeing what wasn't real, but about seeing through the veil that has been pulled over your eyes by the world around you. It is about throwing off the blinders of materialism, competition, hierarchy, and status. It is embracing one's own belovedness by God, a belovedness that each of us shares with every other creature of God. The longer these women listened to Jesus, the more they learned how to see the world as God saw it, to know themselves as living first of all in the Kingdom of Heaven rather than the Roman Empire or the strictures of their own cultural, religious, political, social, and economic location.

These women had thought they had found all these things in Jesus. Jesus as much as told them so. And he seemed to be the real deal. Right up until last Friday – when he was arrested, tried, and crucified all in a day. They still had no idea how this even could have happened. All their hopes and expectations had been shattered. And now their dreams, their quest for life, lay in these tombs, among the dead.

Which of those stories was most true, most defining, most real for their lives?

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III. Good News

The women came to the tomb looking for the embodiment of their dreams, lying in repose and beginning to disintegrate. But the tomb was empty: he was not there.

They looked among the tombs, the place set aside for death and corruption, the loss of hope and the imperative to relinquish one's heart's desires. But he was not there.

The reality of what God was doing in the world was so out of character with human expectation, that even seeing wasn't believing. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the character of life to which every disciple of Jesus is invited, the nature of the living God, was so unexpected, so incongruous with what has gone before that it cannot be grasped merely by seeing the evidence.

Instead what is required is the telling of the story. A story more true than any other.

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IV. Invitation

We all have our stories and our expectations about how the world works. We even have stories about how God works. But the reality of God’s Kingdom is as perplexing and difficult to understand as an empty tomb. That’s why we spend so much time seeking the living among the dead. We look for happiness in jobs and wealth, in cars and houses, in alcohol and in sex. But all these things, while not bad in and of themselves, can become deadly traps that seem to promise fulfillment without ever actually following through. If you rely on any of these things for your wellbeing, they will lead you only to death. They never last. Their promises of permanence and security and satisfaction are lies.

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On the other hand, the function of a church is to seek the living where it is: in the Kingdom of God. We do this by listening to Jesus. We do this through rites and words, through fellowship and serving others. We do this by telling each other over, and over, as the angels did the women in our story, “[Jesus] is not here [embodied in jobs and wealth, cars and houses, alcohol and sex], but has risen!” We, the church, are like a 12-step group constantly reminding one another, encouraging one another, to reach out for a destination we have not yet achieved. We gather to practice living “as if” the things we say are true. We gather to practice grasping onto mysteries we don’t understand, ideas that still surprise us and leave us perplexed. We gather to support one another in our faith which often falters, but which we continue to pursue, because the promise of Jesus is too wonderful, and life without him is too broken and messed up, for us to be willing to get stuck in any other course. And so we search for the living God... among the living!

We search among the living in worship, in fellowship, in service to others. We search in study, in giving, and in engagement with our neighbors like Rowan University. Because it is among all these that we know that we will find God.

Searching for the living among the ruins of churches in Sri Lanka, among the survivors of the shooting in Columbine, emotions are raw and lamentation is loud. But there is a story that is impervious to bombs and bullets, one that tenaciously holds on and will not be hindered from coming to its fulfillment in the lives of those who hold it dear, even after their mortal flesh has finished its work. This is the story that Jesus told to Mary, Joanna, Mary, and their friends. It is the story that Jesus continues to tell us today.

Jesus has risen from the dead. And on the one hand that makes no sense. On the other hand, it invites us to a new perspective where it does make sense, and it makes sense of our own lives as well. The cultivation of this perspective, and of lives that make sense in this new perspective, is the work of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church. This is how we respond to the bombed church, to the desecrated high school, to the broken relationship, to the struggling child, to the empty tomb, and to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That is how we respond the tragedies, the deep sadnesses, and to the stuck places in our own lives.

In joy and weeping and defiance all at once we cry: Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

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