

# Why Seek the Living Among the Dead?

Exodus 15:1-11, Luke 24:1-12 (ESV)

January 15, 2006

“Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Thus did the two men at the tomb ask the women who went there seeking Jesus. It is an odd question, challenging what they had seen with their own eyes. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Thus in effect did the women at the tomb then go and ask the male apostles, though they were not yet seeking Jesus anywhere, which was worse. They, too, assumed that he was still dead. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Luke preserved this question for Theophilus and so poses it even to us yet today, challenging the age old faith of humanity that death is final, that death has the last word, and that the dead stay dead. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Is that not the strangest question ever asked?

The stated assumption of the question, the major affirmation to which it leads us, is none other than the good news of Easter. Jesus Christ, who had been crucified, dead, and buried on Friday, is here and now on the following Sunday morning referred to as “the living.” “The living” usually applies to people before they are crucified, dead, and buried. Here, “the living” is applied to Jesus Christ after he was crucified, dead, and buried. It seems out of sequence. It seems out of time. It seems wrong. And yet, the tomb was empty. The stone was rolled away. The women did not find the body. He was not there. He was not among the dead. He was, instead, again among the living. Indeed, the two men at the tomb affirmed the same, explicitly: “He is not here, but has risen.” That was new. That was different. That was unanticipated.

“He is not here, but has risen.” This is the good news of Easter, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the very content of the gospel, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the major affirmation of the Christian faith, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the great hope of all humanity, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Indeed, this is more than we have dared to hope, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is what we need more than we need anything else, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is what we cannot do for ourselves, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is more than we have been bold to imagine, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the courage by which alone we live, that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is, if not exactly the answer, the rebuttal to

the question posed at the tomb: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” “He is not here, but has risen.” Thanks be to God!

It is important for us to realize that the two men at the tomb did not speak on their own authority. They referred the women and so us back to the teachings of Jesus Christ himself: “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” “Remember how he told you... that the Son of man must...rise.” The basis of Christian faith is the word of God in the teachings of Jesus Christ. “Remember how he told you... that the Son of man must...rise.” That is to say, faith comes from remembering the word of God. Remembering the word of God comes from hearing it. Hearing the word of God comes it being read and preached. Reading and preaching the word of God comes from the Bible and, in this case, from the teachings of Jesus Christ. That is why we are here, Sunday after Sunday, reading, preaching, hearing, and remembering the word of God.

“Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise.” Yes, that is what he said, and that is how it happened. On Thursday evening, Jesus was betrayed and arrested. During the night, he was tried. On Friday, he was crucified. Given that all this came true, why, on Sunday morning, do we expect to find him still in the grave? Why, on Sunday, are we perplexed by the empty tomb? Why do we seek the living among the dead? Why? Because we do not remember what he told us. Such faithlessness is a result of not remembering the word. Not remembering the word comes from not hearing it. Not hearing the word comes from a paucity of reading and preaching the word. But on that day, the women “remembered his words.” So on that day, they believed in the resurrection. And on that day, they first preached the resurrection.

The facts of the situation were simple, in a way: the tomb was open and empty, and the body was nowhere to be found. But such facts alone led to perplexity. The truth of the situation had to come from beyond the bare facts. The truth of the situation had to come from the word of God. When and only when the women “remembered his words,” did they know the truth, and only then did they understand the facts. What is the great truth of Easter? “He is not here, but has risen.” Jesus Christ, who was crucified, dead, and buried, is now alive! This is the most important truth of the universe: Jesus Christ is alive! The one who was rejected by the people of God and executed by the state has been accepted and made alive again by God. The one who was born in a barn and laid in a feed trough, the one who was executed on a cross and laid in a tomb, has now been raised from the grave. This had never happened before. But now it has happened, and it is the most important thing that has ever happened.

This great truth of Easter, that Jesus has risen from the dead means that death has been defeated. Our old enemy, the end of all life as we know it, the destroyer of all dreams, the breaker of all hopes, the crushing burden of all life, the end of all breath, the loss of all love, the fear of all hearts, the way of all flesh, the abyss into which all fall, death itself has now been defeated. Its power has been broken. Its might has been undone. Its reign has been taken away. Its terror has been removed. This one time, God has recreated new life on the other side of death, in a way that is forever beyond the reach and power of death. God alone is God! Death is not God. Death is exposed as the second rate power it is. Death continues today only by the permission of God, and the day is coming when it will not continue, when its permission will be withdrawn, when its power will be ended, and when its reign will be taken away. The truth of Easter is a sign and a promise of that final victory yet to come.

That God raised Jesus Christ from the dead is also God's vindication of his entire life, his teachings, preaching, ministry, and healings, and his sufferings, sacrifice, and death, of everything we have read about for the last sixteen months. Though the world rejected Jesus Christ, God accepted him. Though the world cast him aside, God lifted him up. Though the world buried him in the ground, God raised him to heaven. Were his prophecies outlandish? As it turns out, they were exactly right. Were his teachings extreme? Perhaps, but they, too, were correct. Was his call to discipleship demanding? Yes, absolutely, and with every good reason. Was his self-sacrifice ridiculous? It was extravagant and outlandish, and it was exactly what the situation demanded. Were his faith in God, his hope in God, and his love of God insane? No, they were entirely justified. And by raising him from the dead, God vindicated everything Jesus did, everything Jesus said, everything that Jesus was, and everything that Jesus was about. God refused to lose any of that. God refused to let death hold any of it. So God regathered all of that to himself and made Jesus alive again.

How can we believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ today, 2,000 years after it happened? One of the consequences of the resurrection was the empty tomb. That by itself is not sufficient for faith, but the empty tomb is necessary to the faith. Without it there would be no resurrection, no faith, and no Christianity.

So, Christian faith in God and in his Christ is based not only on the empty tomb but also and more so on the word of God and on the witness of those whom the risen Lord encountered. The two men reminded the women of what Jesus had told them, "and they remembered his words." Later that day, the risen Lord himself explained to his disciples how the law, prophets, and psalms pointed ahead to him and told of his suffering, his rising, and his glory. He reminded them of his own teaching. So faith comes from the word of God, as the Holy Spirit bears testimony

to it in our hearts. Moreover, we know and believe that Jesus Christ has risen from the tomb and is alive by the witness of the women who went to the tomb. We know and believe this by the witness of the apostles, who did not know or believe it themselves at first but came to know and to believe it with all their hearts.

Soon after the resurrection, the apostles, who had been cowering behind locked doors in fear for their own lives after seeing what had happened to Jesus, were standing on the street corners declaring that this same Jesus was alive and was Lord of the universe. Tradition has it that eventually all of them were arrested and killed for preaching the resurrection. So, why did they do that? Not for the fun of it. Not because they wanted to preserve the memory of the dead Jesus. Not because they were stupid. Not for hope of fame or fortune. There is no human accounting for the courage of their witness to the resurrection and their preaching of the gospel. The only possible reason that they could have been preaching that Jesus was alive is that Jesus was, in fact, alive.

Consider this also: no one ever produced the body. Despite denials of the resurrection by the religious establishment and by the officials of the state, despite the problems being created by street preaching and the rapidly growing Christian church, no one ever produced the body. The easiest way to silence, to shame, and to ridicule the apostles, and the quickest and most effective way to put an end to their talk about Jesus having risen from the grave, would have been to have produced the body, to have dug it up, to have paraded it through the streets, and to have shown it to everyone. But no one did that. Instead, they were faced with the incontrovertible fact that the tomb was empty. The body was not there. The people of God who rejected Jesus were incapable of producing the body. The full military force of the Roman Empire was incapable of producing the body. That would have nipped Christianity in the bud, but they did not, because they could not, produce the body. And the apostles continued to preach, so more and more people believed the good news which the two men at the tomb had announced to the women, that Christ has risen from the dead!

What does this ancient word of God have to do with us yet today? The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the basic and central content of the Christian faith. God has raised him from the dead. Moreover, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the basis of all the rest of the Christian faith. Without it we would have nothing, but with it we have everything. The resurrection demonstrates the power of God. It establishes the veracity of the scriptures. It confirms the identity of Jesus as the Christ. It shows that the power of God, who created the world, is greater than the power of death, which can only take away life. God, who made us, has saved us for himself and reclaimed us as his very own.

Moreover, the resurrection of Jesus Christ constitutes the defeat of death once and for all and so is the promise of resurrection life for us. God did not raise Jesus merely for his own sake. In his resurrection the power of death is broken, death is robbed of its false appearance of being absolute, and we are given the promise and good hope of life with God beyond life and death on this earth. Because God raised Jesus from the dead and made him alive again, so shall God raise us from the dead and make us alive again. In his resurrection God has defeated death, so his victory is the promise of our own resurrection and that of those whom we love.

Where does that leave us in the meantime? There are implications not only for our deaths, but also for our lives. Since the power of death is broken, the life-robbing fear of death is diminished, so we can go about our lives with confidence, dignity, poise, joy, and good hope. We can worship God our Creator gladly, safe in the knowledge that he is also our Redeemer. We can thank God for the forgiveness of sin, because sin and evil were defeated on the cross. And we can bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and share the good news of the gospel with all people.

This witnessing started in today's reading: the two men at the tomb bore witness to the women, and the women bore witness to the apostles. The apostles have borne witness to us. Now it is our turn. We are responsible for being faithful. We are responsible for bearing witness. We are called to share the great truth of the universe, that Jesus is alive. There is no one in the world who does not need to hear the word of God, the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

"Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Thus did the two men at the tomb ask the women who went there seeking Jesus. It is an odd question, challenging what they had seen with their own eyes. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Luke preserved this question for Theophilus and so poses it even to us yet today, challenging the age old faith of humanity that death is final, that death has the last word, and that the dead stay dead. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" "He is not here, but has risen."

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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