

“Remembering the Future”

Luke 24:1-12

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“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” It’s a good question and not just for the women at the tomb on Easter morning. How often do we look for the living among the dead? Looking for life in places where there is none? Tending to the corpses of former visions of ourselves, of life before a loss, revisiting fresh endings - as if we might find clues to a future there in the rubble of the past? It’s a good question *for the church* in our time that so often seems stuck in nostalgia, speaking longingly of times when the children were plentiful, the resources more than adequate. We keep looking for the living among the dead. And it’s a good question for a culture obsessed with wanting to make things great again. I know that this has become a partisan slogan, but I’ve heard the sentiment expressed in different ways across the political spectrum.

I’ve heard African-American elders wonder if desegregation should now be celebrated as a win or marked as the beginning of the destruction of African-American institutions and the community they supported.

I’ve heard newspaper reporters wax nostalgic on the days when readership was as plentiful as the reporters hired to cover all the beats.

I’ve heard more than one lifelong Baltimorean recall those bygone days when Bethlehem steel kept the unemployment rate low and the city full and functional. We all long for the past in different ways. We have all looked for the living among the dead.

The women don’t answer the angel’s question maybe because the answer is obvious - when we can’t see a discernable future ahead of us - one that is obtainable, or rational, or reasonable, the past seems like the only option available to us. We go back there looking for evidence that things don’t have to be as bad as they are in the present. Or we go back looking for positive memories to help cope with present pain. Or we go back there because in the deepest kinds of endings, sometimes we don’t know where else to go.

The women don’t give the angels an answer, maybe because it’s the wrong question as far as they are concerned. They don’t come to the tomb looking *for the living* among the dead. They come looking *for the dead* among the dead. When the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb, the text right before this one - the one that closed out the Friday crucifixion story - says, “the women. . .saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.” They were coming to anoint his dead body. They had to wait to get to the tomb because yesterday was the sabbath and they rested like you are supposed to do on the sabbath. But when they headed to the tomb early on Sunday morning, they knew that what they

would find was Jesus' body in the tomb where they had already seen it. *They were not coming to look for the living among the dead. They were coming to tend to the dead.*

I don't know why the angels ask this question that seems to miss what is actually happening with these women at the tomb. Maybe these particular angels were inexperienced or trying something new. None of the other angels that appear at the beginning of Luke's Gospel - Gabriel telling a surprised Zechariah that he will become the father of John the Baptist; Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit; the angels who appear to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night - none of them asks any questions of the people they surprise with their visits. They just announce realities -

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." (Luke 1:13-14)

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." (Luke 1:30-31)

"Do not be afraid; [shepherds], for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12)

The only questions asked in all these angel stories, come from the people visited *by the angels*, not the angels themselves.

Maybe these two angels at the tomb missed the memo - just show up and announce. Don't ask questions. And for goodness sakes, reassure the people you are visiting they need not fear. That's what every other angel announces in Luke's Gospel. "Do not fear." It's also what happens in Matthew and Mark's versions of the resurrection story. "Do not fear" - the first words out of nearly every angel's mouth except these two. It's not like the women in Luke's Gospel are any less terrified. They were so terrified, the story tells us, that they couldn't make eye contact. They looked at the ground.

But I wonder if Luke's angels start with this question - "why do you look for the living among the dead" because they have some idea of the burden that these women are about to carry with them. The burden that it is to speak resurrection nonsense in a world that's already decided the past is better than the present and maybe even the future. The burden that it is to carry hope in a world that is drenched in fear. The burden that it is to allow yourself to believe that tomorrow can be better than yesterday, that greatness is not something that must be exhumed from the past, dragged forward from the dead. The angels know that the terror that these women feel at the tomb is the *beginning of their troubles*, not the end of them.

Try announcing resurrection hope in your own life and see what happens.

Try telling your friends and neighbors that you believe that Baltimore's best days are ahead and not behind, and see what kind of response you get.

Try announcing that the divisions in our land are not as permanent as we may think and see what happens.

Try announcing that the fear that so many now carry in their hearts - fear of immigrants, fear of Black bodies, fear of economic collapse, fear for our children's future - can be overcome by the power of love, and see what happens.

If you allow yourself to believe in empty tombs - in the possibility that God can and does bring life where the world knows there is only death; if you allow yourself to believe and risk sharing that conviction with others, things will get worse for you, not easier.

The angels seem to know this. So they ask a question to challenge instead of comfort, to spark their imagination and reframe their own ideas about what is possible. A question that more of a suggestion than an inquiry - *seek out the living* instead of looking for the dead; *seek out what can give us life* instead of the things that are bringing us death; *seek out where God is headed*, not where we've already been. It's a question to agitate these women to persist in that quest even when their life-affirming good news is rejected.

The angels know that gospel news is always met with resistance. "Remember how he told you. . .that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Remember. Not a memory of days gone by, but a memory of Jesus' promises, of his words and his warnings.

Jesus warned you, they seem to suggest, that it would play out like this. That resurrection hope doesn't come without a lot of suffering and the endings that come with it.

Jesus warned you - that resurrection hope doesn't come without the worst kind of suffering alongside it.

Jesus warned you that resurrection hope doesn't come easy. It comes in the midst of struggle not instead of it. It lives in the midst of doubt, not the opposite of it. It's comes in the middle of your grieving, your wounding, your suffering, not as a substitute for it. Remember Jesus' words and you will be remembering your future. Remember Jesus' words and you will be able to persist in your proclamation even when their life-affirming good news is rejected.

And rejection is exactly what these first proclaimers receive. They leave the tomb and immediately experience the burden of bearing resurrection news. The burden of announcing resurrection in a world that's already settled on the idea that the things that Jesus was peddling - love of neighbor, forgiveness of enemies, peace among the nations, abundance instead of scarcity, hospitality to the stranger, enough for everyone - it's all a bunch of hogwash. That's what the disciples call it when the women first tell them about what they saw. "An idle tale" - *Lēros* in the Greek. The most accurate translation I can give in church without upsetting anyone is "a bunch of bull." *Lēros*. "These words seemed to them a bunch of bull and they did not believe them." It's an aggressive rejection of the women's testimony; more aggressive than is necessary just to reject the message. It's a power play. Which seems so incredibly contemporary at a time where people actually seem comforted by the familiar news that the world stinks, that everything can only get worse, that we can't solve problems together, that we can't learn to love each other, that corruption and incompetence and unethical behavior has

spoiled everything permanently. We've found comfort in the dismissive rejection of the idea that God can do a new thing.

I'm sure that, as women living in the first century, they were used to this kind of power play; this kind of dismissive rejection. It's been the experience of many women for a very long time. "From women," the historian Josephus wrote at about the same time Luke's Gospel was being written, "let not evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex."

¹ Of course their testimony was rejected. And, if we're honest - most of us, regardless of our gender or theirs, have a hard time believing them, too. Not for the misogynist reasons expressed by Josephus, but because of the news itself. Angels at an empty tomb are hard to believe regardless of the source of the testimony.

But maybe that's exactly why women had to be the first witnesses at the tomb, the first preachers of resurrection, the first bearers of testimony. If you are going to announce that God is able to bring life where we see only death, you better be prepared to encounter severe resistance. If you're going to proclaim that God's love is stronger than our fear in the middle of an Empire built on fear, then you've got to expect to be dismissed. If you're going to vocalize that more is possible in our world than what we've come to accept as our current situation, then you're going to need the experience of persevering when you are dismissed, rejected, even ridiculed, sometimes in ways that are more aggressive than is necessary. Announcing resurrection hope isn't for the faint hearted. It's only for those intent on rejecting the status quo culture that infects all kinds of people, even Jesus' closest followers.

And yet once resurrection is announced and entertained as a real possibility, the whole world looks different. The possibility for life in the midst of death. The possibility for beginnings where there seems to be only endings. The possibility for hope where most of the world seems to see only despair. The possibility for love where there is so much fear. The possibility for a future that is different from the past. It's all there waiting for a just a few messengers, a few proclaimers, a few first converts to the possibility that God is already at work in the midst of our harshest suffering, our worst endings, our deepest wounds. God is already at work in the midst of our city's implosions, our nation's betrayals of its guiding values, our planet's human-induced destruction. God is already among the living making a way in the wilderness, giving water in the dry places, and rivers in the desert. God is doing a new thing among the living. . .among the living, among the living!

¹ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 228 cited in Gregory A. Robbins, "Luke 24:1-12: Exegetical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2009, p. 353.