

Perplexed

April 4, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Luke 24:1-12

[Wrap head in shawl]

It was early. Too early. The sun wasn't due to rise for another couple of hours and I lay wide awake in my bed. The truth is, I don't think I have caught more than a few hours' sleep in the last three days combined. There are just too many images seared into my mind. Too many thoughts, too many memories, too many feelings that I wish I could escape, but they just won't go away.

Three nights ago Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest friends. One of *my* closest friends. I can't even tell you how many long, deep conversations Judas and I had had – conversations about hopes and dreams, about the Kingdom of God. I really thought I *knew* him.

But then, sold. For a few measly pieces of silver. They arrested him, dragged him away in chains. None of us even knew fully where they had taken him, much less how he was doing, how he was feeling, what lay in store for him. We were up all night, worrying, crying, hiding, listening for any sign of moment – jumping at every rustle of the leaves, both terrified that it might be the soldiers coming for us too and hoping against hope that it might be Jesus walking through that door to tell us that everything was fine and this was all just a bad dream. None of us slept a wink that night.

Unfortunately, it was not all just a dream. It was a nightmare unfolding before our very eyes. And the things we saw. The brutality we witnessed the next day. I've never seen such anger, such cruelty, before in my life. And there was nothing I could do to stop it. Those images, those scenes, the pain of that day are forever burned into my memory. And I spent all night re-living every brutal moment of that day. I couldn't make it stop.

Yesterday was the Sabbath. A day of rest. A day for our bodies and minds and spirits to take a breath. To breathe in the gift of life and to prepare our souls for the week ahead. Fortunately, a man by the name of Joseph had taken it upon himself the night before to remove Jesus' body from the cross, to wrap him in a clean cloth and to lay him to rest in a tomb that had never before been used. There wasn't time to anoint his body before the Sabbath – and besides, he died the death of a criminal. The religious leaders were not going to bother about doing anything more for him than what is strictly required by Jewish law. But that doesn't mean we couldn't do something.

So in these early morning hours, since we couldn't sleep anyway, three of us women got up and prepared spices and ointments that we could use to anoint Jesus' body. It would not be anything like he deserved. He deserved a burial fit for a king, a messiah, a

prophet – but at least his body would not be forgotten. At the very least we could pay him *this* honor, *this* respect. And we could say goodbye.

As the three of us set out for the tomb, it became clear that none of us had been getting much sleep. Our bodies and minds were exhausted. Nobody said much, and when anyone did open her mouth to speak, it didn't make much sense. It was hard just to form thoughts. And so we journeyed on in silence.

As we drew closer to the tomb, my heart started beating faster and faster, thumping out of my chest. And I was having a hard time catching my breath. It felt almost like I was having a heart attack. My mind was swimming incoherently, like the walls were closing in on me – but we were outside. There were no walls. What would we find when we got to the tomb? Would there be soldiers? Guards? How would we explain what we were doing? Would they let us in? Would they drag *us* away like they had dragged Jesus away? And if they did let us in to anoint the body, what would **that** be like? What would it feel like to place our hands on the lifeless body of this man who seemed to have so much power over life itself? How would it feel to see our dear friend...dead?

[Remove shawl]

I think Easter has to be my single favorite holiday of the year. It represents so much for me. It represents pure, unbridled joy. It signals for me a movement from the cold and the darkness of winter to sunshine and springtime and flowers and butterflies. But most of all it reminds me of life, and hope, and promise. It reminds me that as dark as life can get – as painful and gruesome and cruel and brutal as life can sometimes be, pain does not get the last word. Death has lost its sting. And as disoriented and as disenchanting as we might get at times with the struggles and pains of life, in the end there is always an empty tomb.

I love the Alleluias. I *love* singing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” at the top of my lungs. I love getting up early in the morning while it is still dark (mind you, this might be the one and only day of the year that I actually enjoy getting up while it is still dark) and watching the sun come up. Watching the light chase away the darkness. Feeling the warmth of the morning sun gently erase the biting chill of the night.

For me, Easter is the single biggest celebration of the year. The only one in which *consistently*, every single year without fail (even when it has been a hard week leading up to it) I can close my eyes and feel complete, unbridled joy.

That said: I think it is worth noting that this kind of joy over the empty tomb was *not* exactly the reaction that those who actually witnessed the empty tomb experienced.

As we read through the story, the people were NOT:

- Overjoyed
- Elated

- Jubilant
- Full of Praise

In fact we are told that

- When the women found the tomb empty, they were **Perplexed**
- When the women entered the tomb and saw the “glowy men,” they were **Terrified**
- When the disciples received news about what had happened, they called the story an “**Idle Tale**”
- And when Peter saw the linen cloths lying where Jesus had been he was **Amazed** – and yet, he held this amazement in. In Luke’s gospel, Peter told no one about what had happened.

I think we need to remember that Jesus’ followers had just been through a *huge* trauma. Let’s remember that they had given up *everything* to follow Jesus. They had turned their whole lives upside down, and then now, in a matter of a few days their lives were turned upside-down again and they were shaken to the core. They were terrified. They were traumatized. They were grieving. They had just witnessed perhaps the most gruesome death of their lives – the death of someone they had placed all of their hopes and dreams in. They no longer knew who Jesus had been, who they were, and what the next few *hours* would hold, much less the rest of their lives. They were thrown into a sort of existential crisis – a wild tailspin – and *everything* that they thought they knew was tossed up in the air.

- So when they looked into the tomb and found it empty, of *course* their first thought wasn’t “Christ is risen! Alleluia!” It was more like “Who stole the body?!”
- When the women saw the two men in dazzling clothes sitting where Jesus’ body had been, their first thought wasn’t “We are standing in the presence of angels” but terror. Fear. Maybe a little bit of concern that after three sleepless nights in a row they might be hallucinating.
- And when the women ran to tell the disciples everything they had seen, of *course* the reaction of the disciples was not one of elation, but disbelief. An “idle tale,” “Fake news.”

And I have the distinct feeling that God understood that.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” the two men in dazzling clothes asked the terrified women.

- Why are you searching for comfort in a tomb?
- Why are you looking for the God of life in a place of death?
- It’s like they knew that the women, and by extension the disciples, were stuck in this spiral of despair, agony, hopelessness, darkness. A kind of death of their own. A death of their hopes and dreams. A death of their livelihoods. A death of their sense of identity. And so the two men say to the women – that is not where God is. God is not among the dead.

Jesus is not here. He is risen. He has conquered death. He has overcome suffering. He has scattered darkness. The night is over. He is risen. Just as he said would happen.

So expect to see the sun shining again. Expect to see the flowers blooming. Expect to see the butterflies coming out of their cocoons in all of their vibrant colors. Expect the God of life to bring life. Expect wholeness, and healing. Expect sorrow to be turned to joy. When you see bright lights, *expect* that those are angels and not hallucinations.

Friends, we have been through *something* this year. At the beginning of Lent, I mentioned that it feels like we have been walking through a full year of Lent, beginning in March of 2020. A long, dry desert wilderness, marked with confusion and frustration around every corner. Signs of suffering and death everywhere we look. Brokenness and division; people hurting people; riots and shootings and violent mobs, not to mention disease and death. Isolation and loneliness and a whole lot of grief heaped upon grief heaped upon grief.

And as I talk about the last year, it almost feels like I am describing the painful events of Holy Week. And if some of us find ourselves a little worse for the wear; expecting to hear more bad news every time the phone rings or every time we turn on the news; expecting to maybe see angry guards at the tomb instead of angels – it's no wonder. That's the year we have been living. And I think God understands that too.

Which is why the angels' words to the women are so important for us as well. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Why are you searching for signs of life in all the wrong places? Open your eyes and see that Jesus is not here in this tomb. He is risen. He is out there. The God of life is alive. So go. Step out of the tomb and into the land of the living – where the sun shines and the flowers grow and the colors are brilliant. Step out, expecting to be met by joy, and hope, and promise. And you will be.

So friends, here's the question for us: In those moments before the sun has risen;

- In those moments of darkness and exhaustion and fear and grief;
- In those moments when it feels like death is going to get the last word;
- In those moments when we are absolutely certain that there is no way life as we know it can be what we want it to be;
- In those moments of uncertainty and doubt;
- Those moments when we question who we are;
- When we feel like we are the walking dead and we wander around torn and confused and broken, looking for any meaning we can in the darkness; looking for any signs of life amidst the dry bones, here's our question:

If this God raised Jesus from the dead, what else can this God do in my life? Not just to raise me from death, but to raise me from all the little deaths – the griefs and the sorrows and the disappointments of life? Because here's the thing: we have a God of

life. A God who is among the living. A God who has broken our chains, set us free, and raised *us* from death as well.

For Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!