

Easter Sunday: Believe it **Based on Luke 24:1-12**

The disciples are smart. You can debate whether they're very faithful, but they are definitely not stupid. They don't go to the tomb to tend to Jesus' body. What would be the point? Jesus is dead, after all. He won't feel your attentions to his body, he won't know of your respect. Your visit won't undo the crucifixion. It won't do Jesus any good. So, like the stereotypical dad who stays home to read the Sunday paper, the disciples do not come to the tomb at all; they let the women go by themselves. Of course, the disciples, unlike the stereotypical dad, are not relaxing and comfortable. Most likely they are huddled together, strategizing about how best to avoid being crucified themselves.

It must have been dangerous to go to the tomb, two and a half days after Jesus had died. Jesus was publicly executed, for crimes against the state—the only crimes for which the Romans crucified. It has become dangerous to be associated with Jesus, as Peter's denial shows us. The Romans disliked the Jesus movement enough to break Jesus' body publicly. So anyone coming to tend to that body now, to pay it respect—that person surely would also be suspect. But the women cannot seem to help themselves.

The women go to the tomb not hoping anything will happen there. In fact, their best hope is that nothing will happen there. They will go, clean and dress the body, perfume it a little with their spices, and leave, unnoticed. They are going only to find comfort for themselves and to do honor to Jesus' body and his memory. They expect to find Jesus there, but they expect to find him dead.

It occurs to me that many Christians come to church the same way as those women went to the tomb. Maybe all of us have come with that attitude at some point in our churchgoing lives. We come to honor what has been—to honor the years and the people who built this sanctuary, the generations who carved that baptismal font, to draw comfort from our own memories in this and other churches, memories that have wrapped themselves around the Apostles Creed and the Lord's prayer, the tunes of the hymns and even the creak of the pews. Many of us come to pay tribute to that which remains, when the storms of life have passed by.

There's nothing wrong with that. There is nothing wrong with the recognition that we need a point of connection with what went before. It may seem empty to come to church only because it is familiar, only because this is one place where we feel that we know what to do next. But the more rapidly the world around us changes, the more a place of familiarity seems essential. The more our society pushes toward the future—with anxiety or with eagerness—the more we feel the very human need to remember the past.

There is nothing wrong with the women's desire to go to the tomb, to honor Jesus' dead body, to recognize what had been and to draw comfort from paying respect. And there is nothing wrong with coming to church for similar reasons. But our faith tells us that what we expect, the

familiar, the dead, the past, is not always what is here—and that's good news. It is, in fact, *the* good news. The dead body that the women are looking for is missing. The dead body is no longer dead. He's not there, because he's alive and active and on the move, doing something somewhere else. The memory of lives transformed, the memory that they came to honor, isn't a memory; it's an ongoing, life-giving experience.

When I first started attending church, it was because I was living with my sister and brother-in-law and my brother-in-law was a pastor. I was an atheist, or at least, an agnostic. I went to hear him preach, because he usually had something interesting to say, and I went to be polite. It was familiar, since I had grown up going to church. Probably the stability, the continuity of it appealed to me, since my college years had been pretty chaotic. It appealed to me, but it bored me too, don't get me wrong. I didn't believe a word of what was said. I just did it out of respect and a very mild kind of interest. And only very gradually it dawned on me—oh, it's about life. It's a way to ask real questions, questions I'd had trouble formulating until then. I began to realize: it's not a museum. It's not a lesson in anthropology, a study in human history. There's something actually happening here amid the words and the music. I hear something in there and I think it's my life.

I thought the faith was something dead—for me, if not for the others who gathered at that church. I listened to it like a tired old story, and only realized after some time that it was a story in which I could and did play a part.

I know that on Easter lots of folks come to church who might not come any other Sunday of the year, for reasons similar to the reasons I went to hear my brother-in-law preach. My guess is that some of those present here today have the idea Christianity is something from and for the past, that Christianity is fading away or that religion is dying off. I'm here to tell you, Christianity is alive and well and religion shows no signs of going away. Christianity is not dying—it's changing. Fifty years ago, something like 80% of the world's Christians lived in the northern hemisphere—in Europe and the US. Today 80% of the world's Christians live in the South, in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia. Christianity is changing complexion, it is changing emphasis, it is changing worship styles and theologies. So if you came as though to honor a dying or a dead life form, here's the thing. It's not dead; it's not even sick. The question for us faithful churchgoers here in North America, in the mainline Protestant churches, is whether we're going to stick to old familiar ways in our music, in our worship, in our way of doing mission; whether we're going to keep hanging around the empty tomb in Jesus' honor, or whether we're going to follow the living Jesus where he is going.

Many of us come to church for the peace and quiet of going through the motions, for the calm that comes from honoring what has gone before. But if sometimes we come and find no calm, it may be that that's a good thing. If sometimes the worship service unnerves us, if the children's voices disturb our peace, if we have to learn a new song in place of the familiar one, that may be good news. It may be that like the women at the tomb, the dead we have come to honor are not dead. The transformation we came to remember and to grieve is not over, it is ongoing.

The women don't go to the tomb with hope. But they do go. They do show up. Because they are a little bit brave, because they are very needy, because they are not too proud, they show up.

And because they're there at the tomb, ready to deal with the pain and the loss, they discover that there is more to the story than pain and loss. Because they are there to do the respect and honor, they discover that there is more to the story than respect and honor, more to the story than familiarity and comfort. There is hope and challenge and transformation; there is life that cannot be defeated. We may come here to honor what has been, to remember events that happened 2000 years ago. We come because we have a little courage and a lot of need, and maybe because in a world of skepticism, we are not too proud to look a little foolish, to be accused of spreading an idle tale. We may come for familiarity and comfort, but what we find is something living—not a monument to life, but life itself. We celebrate on this day, God's ability to escape the tomb, to burst out of the past and walk among us, at any given moment, at every given moment—now. Amen.