

March 31, 2024- Easter Sunday

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Luke 24:1-12

Looking for the Living Christ

Hear these words of promise and hope from the Gospel of Luke chapter 24:

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they, that is Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women, went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered Jesus’ words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Expectations are funny things. Our brains are fine-tuned expectation devices. From an early age, neural connections are strengthened when the signaling cues and the results match our prior experiences. Before I moved to Michigan, if I saw a cloudy sky, I expected rain. My first year here, I always had an umbrella in my bag. But expectations can be reset and now, after two and half years, I think – it’s just a Michigan winter day. And now I am no longer always prepared when it rains. Expectations are funny things.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women had expectations that morning of the first day of the week. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, a long journey, listening ardently to Jesus’ teachings; celebrating the healings of those who had diseases or limitations, those who were lonely or not welcomed, healings that restored people back into community. They had shared the table with Jesus, simple meals on the road and elegant banquets in homes of the rich and powerful. They had come to appreciate the way Jesus made sure all were included at the table, and the times when it seemed like there would not be enough to go around, and yet there was plenty, with leftovers to spare.

So it was important – no essential – for them to see Jesus through his death. Even though their hearts were beyond heavy with grief, they followed the man known as Joseph of Arimathea. They needed to know that the body of their teacher and friend had been cared for in death. They needed to see the tomb and to see how Jesus was laid. And after they saw

the tomb and Jesus' body laid there, they went and prepared spices to anoint his body. After a day of rest on the Sabbath, they returned to the tomb taking with them the spices.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women came as a group, supporting each other in their grief, preparing themselves for the tender task of anointing their beloved friend. They expected that it would be hard to roll away the stone sealing the tomb – but they were a group of strong women and they knew they would find a way to open the tomb. It was that important to them to tend to Jesus' body. They expected that the work would be done with a heavy heart and bring them to tears. They expected that this would be the final time they saw the face of the one who taught them so much about love and grace and forgiveness and the truly important things in life.

Yes, they came to the tomb that morning with expectations. So when they arrived and found the stone rolled away from the tomb and no body, to say that they were perplexed was a bit of an understatement. Their bewilderment was momentary, changing to terror when they saw two men in dazzling clothes standing beside them. The men asked them a question they did not expect, that they were not prepared to answer: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

The women needed only a brief prompt to reset their expectations. The men said to them: “He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.” Then Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women remembered Jesus' words. They left the tomb and returned to where the eleven disciples were staying and told them this news. I can imagine the women repeating the words of the two men, men in dazzling white clothes, that have been described as angels. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” And then reminding the eleven that Jesus himself had told them that that he would die and be raised up again.

The women experienced the empty tomb. The women remembered Jesus' words. Was this an idle tale, as the eleven apostles initially thought? Peter went and saw for himself – he ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, Peter saw the linen cloths by themselves. And then Peter went home, amazed at what had happened. This could be the end of the story. The tomb is empty. Words remembered. But as Religious Studies Professor Gregory Robbins shares, the “The Easter message has three component parts: experience, memory, and [exegetical] insight...Memory corroborates experience, but memory is not enough. Jesus' words are veiled; their experiences are opaque. They must be complemented by insight.”¹

When we celebrate Easter with hearts full of joy and shouts of hallelujah, it is because of the insight of these women. Their insight spurred them onto share with the other apostles what

¹ Gregory A. Robbins. Luke 24:1-12. *Exegetical Perspective. Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 2*; Westminster John Knox Press; 2009, p353.

they saw and what they remembered. They could have kept it to themselves – not uttered a word, knowing that the apostles would accuse them of telling an idle tale or worse. Yet they shared the news, knowing in their hearts that the story was bigger than them. It didn't matter that they couldn't explain all of the details and all of the mechanics of what had happened. What mattered was the tomb was empty and Christ was living. Hallelujah! Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women had the insight to proclaim the risen Christ amidst all of the ugliness and violence that surrounded them. Amongst all of those authorities that said that their voice didn't matter. Amongst all of the uncertainties and dangers that lay before them. Amongst all of those seeking proof and rational explanations. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women had the insight, the courage, the initiative to proclaim that death did not have the last word. Hallelujah!

Now these women knew how to tend bodies that had died. They knew the practices, handed down through the ages by their mothers and grandmothers and aunts and the wise women in their villages. They knew which herbs to choose and how fine to grind the spices and the best olives to press for oil. Although they had varied backgrounds, they knew what was expected of them as women in this time and place. There was some security in that knowledge, even if it was confining. For the world of these women was a world filled with uncertainty. Political headwinds were swirling around them – and it had gotten ugly and there were fears of more ugliness. So many people were hungry – some not sure where their next meal would come from; some hungry for companionship – isolated and alone; so many hungry for justice after years of their voices not being heard. Maybe they should just keep their head down and tend to the dying and the dead. It was safer that way.

And yet they could not shake the question the men in the dazzling white asked them: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women knew that they were being called to look for the Living Christ in the world around them – in the barren emptiness and in the chaos; in lives visibly and publicly pulled apart; and in lives whose surface perfection belied the distress underneath. And yet they knew the Living Christ was there. And they knew that they were called to be partners with the Living Christ, bringing hope in the darkest moments; bringing laughter amidst tears; bringing a homecooked meal and an offer to just sit for awhile.

Two millennia later, we still struggle to see the Living Christ in the messiness of the world around us. Like many people, I can get caught up in the whirlpools of negativity; sitting in the fears and worst case scenarios. I too often am looking for assurance, looking for controllability in a world that feels out of control. I want it all to make sense. And it doesn't.

Two weeks ago the Mission Committee received a message from Pat Faris. Pat is on the Board of Directors for the Haiti Nursing Foundation, an organization she and her husband former PCO Pastor Larry Faris were instrumental in getting off the ground, with former PCO member Jerry Veldman. The Haiti Nursing Foundation, one of PCO's long-standing mission

partners, was founded in 2005 to improve health in Haiti by supporting quality nursing education. Its work is primarily at the Faculté des Sciences Infirmières de l'Université Episcopale d'Haïti (FSIL), located in Léogâne, Haiti, on the coast about 30 miles west of the capital Port-Au-Prince.²

When I think about chaos and a world that doesn't make sense, Haiti is one of those places that pops right up in mind. The news is heartbreaking. It makes me angry and frustrated. And yet, amidst all of the despair, the Living Christ is present. Pat sent word from the Dean of the Nursing School that the school is safe and functioning and that Léogâne appears to be quiet. The school has enough food to serve the staff and students and continues to hold classes. The Living Christ is present! Hallelujah! Earlier this year, Jerry Veldman shared with us that 46 nursing school graduates had passed the National Nursing Exam. And an FSIL graduate had the highest score! He shared about recent Nurse Practitioner graduates now working to care for Haitians in need. The Living Christ is present. Hallelujah!

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women could have tossed up their hands in defeat, hunkered down and thought only of their safety and said nothing. But instead they shared the good news of the Living Christ. Hallelujah! Our mission partners at the Haiti Nursing Foundation could toss up their hands in defeat, hunker down and think only of their safety. But they know that story isn't over and that Living Christ is going to continue to show up. They continue to educate the next generation of nurses who will keep hope alive as they care for those bruised and bloodied by the ongoing strife. Hallelujah!

Do we believe the Good News that tomb is empty and the Living Christ is on the loose? Even if we can't explain all of the details and all of the mechanics of the resurrection, will we be like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women and boldly proclaim Christ is alive – alive in our hearts, alive in our church, alive in the world? Even if others might accuse us of sharing an idle tale. Will we look amongst all of the heartbreak and despair and discord in the world and see the Living Christ at work? The Living Christ is at work in the helpers, as Mr. Rogers shares with us. Hallelujah! I challenge myself to let go of the dead things that weigh me down – the disappointments, the failures, the chaos in the world around us, the unmet expectations, knowing that like the women at the tomb, I could toss up my hands in defeat, hunker down and just try to make it through the day. Instead I charge myself, and all of you, to seek Living Christ. To be open to the unexpected. A flower popping up through the cracks in the pavement; a smile from the person who usually scowls at you; a moment of peace amidst a busy day when you experience God's presence. The Living Christ is present all around us, all the time. We just don't expect to see him. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women didn't expect the news that Christ has risen from the dead. They adjusted their expectations and embraced the Living Christ. Hallelujah! Can we do the same? Amen. Join me in prayer.

² <https://www.haitinursing.org/>