

Sermon – April 17, 2022  
“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Luke 24:1-12

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and enter the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal. Come, Lord Jesus, and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

Notice how Luke begins this chapter. He uses a word that causes everything we have found in Luke’s Gospel to this point to pivot. In the previous chapter, Jesus was crucified and placed in the tomb on Friday as the sun was setting. It seems as if Jesus’ mission ended on that Friday. That is how Luke ended the last chapter. Now he starts a new chapter with the word, “but.” Jesus is dead, and Luke writes to us, BUT “on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb.” These women have come bringing what they understood would be needed to care for Jesus’ body. As they watched Jesus’ crucifixion from a distance on Friday, they realized there would be a need to provide for the completion of the burial of Jesus, and they took steps before the Sabbath started to purchase and prepare what was needed. They obeyed the commandments, waiting until the Sabbath was over, and have come on the first day of the week as soon as it was light enough to provide care to complete the burial ritual for Jesus’ body. Jesus’ body had been placed in the tomb late on Friday by Joseph of Arimathea. The women have come to the tomb looking for Jesus’ dead body. There is no indication they expect to find anything different from what they observed on Friday as the sun was setting. Their hearts are

overwhelmed with grief. They come to do what they can, to love this teacher whom they have followed from Galilee, and, as they have provided and cared for him on that journey, now they come to care for him in his death. When the women arrive at the tomb at early dawn on the first day of the week, Luke notes the stone is rolled back. No other statement about how it was rolled back is mentioned. The tomb is open. The women see this and again we hear Luke's use of this word, "but" when he says they go into the tomb. Luke, with that single word, continues to tell us that something other than care for Jesus' body will happen this morning. Our anticipation should be growing each time we encounter this little word. Why does Luke say, "but"? The stone has been moved away from the entrance to the tomb, the women go into the tomb, and they do not find Jesus' body. They are perplexed. Where could his body be? Wrong tomb? Robbers? Who would have taken away Jesus' body? Remember that word, "but"? Suddenly, two men in clothes, bright like lighting, appear and stand not in front of them, but beside them, with them, among them, close to them. Fear comes over the women. They are in a tomb, the place of the dead. There was no one else in the tomb when they entered. They are filled with fear, the kind of fear that comes when one is in the presence of the divine, fear that locks one in place, and they stand there terrified with their faces bowed to the ground. This is one of the few places in the Bible that when messengers from God appear and speak, the words, "do not be afraid" are not shared by the messengers to allow those present to set aside their fear and to function. There is no need for those words. The words these messengers share will be so good they will destroy fear. Then Luke uses that little word again twice in rapid succession as if to mark something significant, "but the [messengers] said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." Heads bowed in fear now rise at this news. All fear is gone, even fear of bondage to sin and death. Did we catch what Luke wrote, "but has risen"? Jesus was dead, but has risen from the dead. The women standing in the tomb holding spices for the dead have been told that Jesus has risen. Their planned loving care of Jesus' dead body will not be needed. There is no dead body to seal in a tomb. The spices they carry are not needed. Instead, there is something new and unbelievable that needs to be shared. There is news from the tomb where Jesus was placed that changes everything. But the messengers don't stop with the news of a risen Jesus. They continue on with their message, "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

Luke's "but" has become an empty tomb and a risen-from-the-dead Lord. The first indication was a rolled back stone to open the tomb, the next was an empty tomb. Both were indications that did not tell the women what had happened, but left them perplexed, wondering about the current location of Jesus' body. Then comes the message from two angels that Jesus is alive and not among the dead. He is risen! Now in the scripture, there is no indication that the women sat there at the tomb and had an intense theological discussion about what it might mean that Jesus was alive. They don't even seem to be focused on where the risen Jesus might be. They are focused on going and sharing this great news, starting with the eleven and all of the rest of Jesus' followers. Most likely, Jesus' followers are still gathered in the upper room somewhere in Jerusalem, hiding in fear that they might be next to be crucified. Luke states the next part in the story as "and returning from the tomb." I think this should be in all caps. The women did not just walk back from the tomb, filled with the most unbelievable Good News ever heard, that Jesus was risen from the dead. The women return from the tomb and share what they have found: *but* the stone was rolled back, *but* there was no body in the tomb, *but* two dazzling men talked with them and told them not to seek the living among the dead, *but* Christ is risen! These women start sharing this great Good News as soon as it is given to them. It is very rare for people to be named in one of the Gospels, but Luke names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, with the other women who told this to the apostles. These women received the Good News that Jesus is alive, took the Good News to the eleven and the others, and shared the message they had been given by the angels. Luke names them as the first to share the Good News with others and specifically tells us that these three shared the news of the risen Lord with the apostles.

And then Luke uses that little word again, "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." First, Luke uses this word to mark the change of everything moving from death to life and the arrival of the Good News of Jesus being risen from the dead. Then Luke uses this same word when he speaks to the reaction of those who walked three years with Jesus and knew him better than any others. They heard the news as an idle tale and did not believe the women. This is the same response we will receive when we return from our own discovery of the empty tomb and share the Good News. It will seem as an idle tale and many will not believe. But we, like these women named by Luke, are to return from our own trip to an empty tomb and share the Good News through extravagant love. Here it is the apostles, those who will start churches, who have trouble believing. It will take Jesus appearing to them and

helping them believe he is alive before they will be able to believe. And it will take the coming of the Holy Spirit to give them the courage to share the empty tomb and Jesus risen from the dead.

One last time Luke uses that little word, “but.” “But Peter got up and ran to the tomb.” Peter seems to be trying to come to believe in this great Good News. Peter runs to the tomb. Peter has questions. What is happening? What about the news the women shared? Could it be true? Where is Jesus’ body? Peter finds the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, no body of Jesus, and the linen clothes by themselves. There is no angel messenger for Peter, and he goes home, amazed at what happened. Peter does not yet receive any additional information from a heavenly messenger when he visits the tomb. He also has gone to the tomb to look for the living among the dead. As the women shared, Jesus is not among the dead. Peter and the others should be looking for Jesus among themselves, where he is working. One of Jesus’ first works will be to help his disciples understand he is alive. As time goes forward, Jesus will help them to understand what it means that he has risen from the dead and that he is the first born of the resurrection. Later, Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to lead them into the truth that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; and that through his death and resurrection, grace has been extended to all who will believe in Jesus. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” On Friday, Jesus’ lifeless body was placed in the tomb. But, on Easter morning, the first day of the week, everything changed. The stone was rolled back, the tomb was empty, the message from angels was shared that we are not to look for the living among the dead, and as a result, everything has changed for us. The way to forgiveness of sin and life reconciled to God through Jesus Christ was thrown open. This morning we have the Good News from the tomb that “Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed.”

*Pray with me: Father, we give thanks and praise that the stone was rolled back, the tomb was empty, and Jesus was not found among the dead. Jesus, lead us into belief that you have risen from the dead and guide us into opportunities to lovingly share the Good News with those who struggle to believe that you are not among the dead, but among the living, that you are with us, in us and through us made available to others, always present as our risen Lord. Amen*