

Why do you seek the living among the dead? Dream about Barry.

The frontier between this life and the next is, perhaps in all cultures, the familiar territory of women. They attend the events of birth and they have been the ones who have long been relegated the job of preparing a body for burial. So it is not particularly surprising that in Luke's account of Easter morning, women take center stage, "taking the spices that they had prepared" to complete the work of preparing his body since because of the Sabbath they had not been able to do this earlier. Nor is it surprising that they are described just as "the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee."

In the gloom of early morning I imagine a group of women making their way to the tomb. It is the last act of a promising but failed movement. The men, whose brave promises of leadership and loyalty had been extinguished by the sleep that overcame them in the garden at the arrest of Jesus, are still sleeping, disappointed that they had been mistaken about this messianic hope. They are sleeping off the inebriation of their own personal ambitions to power when God's expected reign would come. They had dreamed that when this Jesus brought the kingdom in might and glory to earth, they would be rewarded for their faithful discipleship. Yet on this morning they are still weighed down with the guilty sleep of avoidance and depression. For in the moment of crisis they had all abandoned him, denied him, and betrayed him.

But perhaps because the women are more used to disappointment, not as likely to be seduced by the promise of glory and power, they awaken before dawn to their normal work, to the simple loving care of the body. Now all together in their grief, these women navigate a ghostly passage to the tomb to undertake their culturally customary ritual role as mourners. The courage of the women is unremarkable, unexceptionable, like the growing light, the birds singing. It just IS, like the onset of Spring.

The description of the scene here in Luke is straightforward and matter-of-fact. "They found the stone rolled away from the tomb," it says, "but when they went in, they did not find the body." Here is none of the detail of Mark about anticipating how they will roll the stone away to get access, or of Matthew's convenient earthquake, no preoccupation about who goes into the tomb as in John. The spare-ness of Luke's telling lends it a kind of dream-like quality, that is only enhanced by the appearance-out of nowhere-of two men in "dazzling outfits" standing right "beside them." Obviously in the presence of the holy, they are terrified and fall on their faces to the ground.

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" It's an astonishing question. How do we, you and I, in what ways do we continue to look for the living among the dead? Even though the stone has been moved away, are there ways in which we seek to fix our experience, to judge life as static, stopped, in fact dead? This question abruptly reminds the women of Jesus' promise of Life, to recall the experience of life He offered. It calls us to remember, but to fully remember we must receive forgiveness and be willing to

offer it as well. We will not find life within the framework of death? The framework of death is the world of guilt and blame and betrayal. It is the familiar world in which we all live, and yet like the disciples after the crucifixion we are trying to sleep it off, we are hanging onto denial, excuses, and bargaining. But life is not there. It is only through death of our judgment and blame of self and other that life can be perceived and grasped.

We at St. Stephen's rediscovered the wonderful stories of the Book of Genesis this Lent in the adult forum after the 9:15 service and at the Lenten series on Wednesday nights. You remember the story of Joseph and his brothers. His father Jacob's favorite son, Joseph is hated by his brothers. They are ready to kill him but instead sell him into slavery in Egypt. But God is with Joseph and prospers his way and blesses him until he becomes the Pharaoh's vizier, the second most powerful man in Egypt. When his brothers come down to Egypt to purchase grain because a drought besets their homeland, Joseph recognizes them as those who sold him into slavery. But they are dazzled by his grandeur and do not recognize him. After an elaborate ruse that awakens them to their guilt and blame, he gathers them together and reveals himself to them. What follows is a resurrection appearance at least a thousand years before Jesus. Joseph sends all his Egyptian servants away and reveals himself to his brothers. Speaking in his native language he says, "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into slavery." At this the brothers become so dismayed that they cannot speak and they will not look at him. But he goes on. "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Don't be afraid. God sent me before you to save his people." Then his brothers spoke with him and he embraced them. It's as if he said, "You came looking for and instead found redemption."

Resurrection is not a matter of survival but always of redemption, always a matter of love and forgiveness. "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 sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Remembering what Jesus had told them in Galilee also meant remembering the pain of their disappointment and betrayal of him in Jerusalem. But he is not here; he has risen. As Paul puts it, "as all die in Adam, so all are made alive in Christ." Your betrayal, abandonment, resentment, and murder; in fact all of your sins God has nailed to the cross. They have all been drowned in the water of baptism. And those whose blood may be on your hands God has raised from the dead, and they salute you with the words of the risen Christ. "Do not be afraid." Death no longer has dominion. It is no longer to be feared.

Yet we still operate out of the framework of death. Like the disciples who regard the story the women tell as an "idle tale," we tend to think of this good news as nice for special occasions like Easter, or church on Easter, but it's just not realistic to love and forgive those who hate us and have done and want to do us harm. It's a story that has always been regarded as an "idle tale," fit for women and children, but certainly not for men in the real world. Yet it is a reality that is dawning on us slowly, that we are coming to our selves, our true selves, as we are able to receive it as true, and to live into it more and more as our reality. That's what congregations like ours are for—to help us become people like Peter who despite our denial and betrayal go to the tomb ourselves, so that we

might be amazed enough to listen to the story of the women and hear the words of life, the words of our redemption.

Jesus in the gospels is like a butterfly in a land where everyone else is a caterpillar. And “there is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you that it is going to be a butterfly” (as Margaret Fuller, a leading transcendentalist and early 19th century feminist, said). Death tries to “fix” Jesus, to hold him securely in the tomb, like a beautiful butterfly fixed with a long straight pin in a glass display box. Just as in the framework of death we are always trying to fix others and to “fix” ourselves. But because of the forgiveness of God shown us in the resurrection of Jesus, we have escaped the fixation of death. For as Jesus assures us earlier in Luke’s Gospel, “He is not God of the dead but of the living for ALL are alive in him.” And if all live in God, then through death we are born into a new stage of endless Life, like a butterfly, at baptism we have emerged from our worm-like state and become beautiful creatures that not only Live but bestow life to others. As St. John says in one of his letters, “we do not know what we will become, but we know that when he appears we will be like him.”