

A LIVING FAITH

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Luke 23:50-24:12

As I do each week, as I approach these texts, I ponder the question, “What is it that Luke is teaching his people with this story?” Remember, Luke was writing this gospel for his congregation about 40 to 50 years after Jesus’ life. Luke has compiled these stories and teachings of Jesus to teach his own congregation not just about Jesus but how to be disciples of Jesus. And there is a crucial distinction between the facts of Jesus’ life and the call to discipleship. We find this distinction presented in the Easter reading today.

Our reading begins with the story of a man named Joseph. Joseph is described as being a *good and righteous* man. He was a native of a Jewish town known as Arimathea. He was now a resident in Jerusalem and a member of the ruling Jewish council in that city. This is the same council that argued for Jesus’ execution before Pilate. Luke points out that Joseph did not agree with the actions of the council. In addition, we are told that Joseph *was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God*. It is clear that Joseph is someone who is in tune with Jesus’ message of the kingdom.

Following Jesus’ crucifixion (a passage we looked at last week), Joseph does something unusual. He goes to Pilate and requests Jesus’ body. The bodies of the crucified were normally left on the cross for days or more as a warning to those who might cross the Roman Empire. However, Jewish law, as we find in the book of Deuteronomy requires that a crucified body of a criminal be buried before sundown because these people are a curse on the land.

Joseph is described by Luke as being a *good and righteous* man. Reading these words, I am reminded of two other people we encountered at the beginning of Jesus’ life. If you will recall when Jesus’ parents take him to Jerusalem to the temple for his dedication, two people appear—Simeon and Anna. Both are described as being righteous and faithful people. Independently, they take this infant and declare that he will be special for the people of Israel. Here at the end of Jesus’ life, we have Joseph—also a good and righteous man—taking Jesus’ body to care for it.

When the bodies were taken from a cross they were mostly likely placed in a common grave. These were criminals after all. It is interesting to note the care and respect that those close to Jesus give to his corpse. Joseph puts his reputation on the line by going to Pilate with his request. No respectable citizen goes and asks for the body of a criminal. But Joseph’s request is granted by Pilate and he has the body removed from the cross. It is wrapped in a linen cloth and placed in a *rock-hewn tomb* where no body has been placed before. We hear an echo here of the description of the donkey that Jesus rode into Jerusalem. If you will recall that was

a colt that has never been ridden. So, on his way into Jerusalem, Jesus rides a colt that has never been ridden, and on his way out, he inhabits a never-before-used tomb.

Jesus' death took place on the day before the Jewish Sabbath—we say it was a Friday. The day before the Sabbath was known as the Day of Preparation because that was the day that people prepared for the Sabbath.

Next we meet the women. These women were introduced to us earlier in chapter 8. They are Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others. Luke informed us that Mary Magdalene had been exorcised of seven demons and Joanna was *the wife of Herod's steward*. These woman, and others, had been followers of Jesus since he was in Galilee. They were also, we are told, financial supporters of his ministry.

On the day that Jesus was placed in the tomb, the women followed Joseph and go to the tomb themselves to check on the body. They leave in order to gather spices and ointments to prepare the body for its proper burial. They have to hurry because it is getting close to the start of the Sabbath at sundown. They rest on the Sabbath.

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, they go to the tomb where Jesus had been placed. When they get there they discover that the stone in front of the tomb has been rolled back and the door is open. When they look into the tomb, there is no body there.

While they stand there trying to figure this out, *two men in dazzling clothes* are standing next to them. The women are understandably *terrified*. The last time we saw someone in dazzling clothes was Jesus at the Transfiguration. These are clearly divine beings.

The men ask the women, *Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.* They continue saying, *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?* These words activate the women's memories. They return to the eleven disciples and tell them what they have seen. To the others, this sounds like nonsense and the disciples do not believe the women. But then Peter goes by himself to the tomb to check out their story and he is *amazed* at what he finds.

That is the Easter story as presented by Luke. It is a simple, straight-forward account. It leaves out some of the flourishes that we find in the other accounts. For example, Mark tells us that it is an earthquake that moved the stone. And in this story, there is no Jesus to that appears to Mary. We read about that in the gospel of John.

Back at the beginning of this gospel, in a passage that I have referred to often, Luke informs his readers that his intent is to write an *orderly account*. But the purpose of this orderly account is that the people might learn *the truth concerning these things*. Luke's *orderly account* contains the pertinent facts of Jesus' life. Luke has collected these facts from stories about Jesus that were circulating at the time through the Christian communities, from other written reports of Jesus' life, and from eyewitnesses themselves.

What Luke offers us is more than just the facts of the case. He is not giving us a history lesson, although he is very good at historical details. Luke is teaching his people not just about Jesus but how they in turn can be followers, disciples of Jesus. A disciple here is not just someone who can recite the facts of Jesus' life. A disciple believes the truth, the truth that Jesus was God's son, that Jesus could perform deeds of power, that he could heal, that he could forgive people of their sins, that he introduces us to the kingdom of God. To believe in Jesus means more than just knowing what happened in his life but means having a living faith—a faith that grows and breaths and changes within us.

Now the opposite of a living faith is not a dead faith but it is a static, unchanging faith. For example, I think of an historical figure like Andrew Jackson. Andrew Jackson was president of the United States. He's from Tennessee. His home, the Hermitage, is not far from here. There have been books and books written about Andrew Jackson. We know a lot about Andrew Jackson. We have all the facts of his life that we might want. But we are not disciples of Andrew Jackson.

Joseph of Arimathea, for example, has this living faith. We see it in his desire for the kingdom of God. When the women go to the tomb the angels say something that is very interesting because what I believe that the angels do in here is to offer the women a key to a living faith. Yes, the women may have known Jesus, they may have believed in Jesus, but when they arrive at the tomb they couldn't seem to remember. The angels said, *remember what he said to you*, and then the women do. They remember. It is like a key that opens their hearts. In the story we will look at next week are the two disciples who have given up and heading home. As they travel, they are joined by Jesus but they don't recognize him until they sit down for a meal and Jesus says the words of communion—*Do this in remembrance of me*. And their eyes were opened. This active remembrance is a key.

Last month at communion, I talked about how communion is a remembrance not just of what happened in the past but it is an active involvement of what is happening now, and it points to what we will do in the future in the kingdom of God. So we remember not just the facts, but become involved in a living faith, a faith that is unlocked by the power of God, the power of the Spirit moving through us.

Today, we remember the saints of the church through this All Saints Day. All Saints Day is not just a day to remember those who have died in the past year, or those who we were close to us, it is a time to remember all the saints of all time. As Presbyterians we don't regard our saints as just those canonized by the Catholic church, but all those people of faith who have gone before—millions upon millions, names that have been long forgotten. It is as if we are sitting in a vast stadium surrounded by this cloud of witnesses. And as we gather at the communion table and hear the words of Jesus—*do this in remembrance of me*—we know that we are part of the communion of saints—a living faith that continues through this day and continues in to the next.

We celebrate Easter today because every Sunday is a day to rejoice that Christ is alive. We may not see him there at the tomb, but we can see him walking with us through our lives, opening up our hearts that we might possess a living faith.

For this we can be thankful. Amen.