

Tending to the Gospel
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Luke 24:1-12
March 27, 2016

It had been a long Friday. A nightmare, really. The unspeakable had happened. Jesus, their teacher, their friend, their inspiration had been crucified.

In one moment, they had shared a meal with Jesus. And the next thing they knew, they were standing on Golgotha. Twelve hours felt like twelve seconds.

And then his death. The hours that preceded the cross were rapid. The ones that followed were slow, agonizingly slow. Time didn't stop, but it certainly dripped. A numbness hung over the women.

A few hours after Jesus' death, they scattered, hoping a good night's sleep would bring renewed energy, and perhaps they even hoped they'd wake up to discover it had all been a dream.

Saturday came, and with it, the same heavy, numb, awful reality that Jesus had died. And of course, Saturday was Sabbath, and not just any Sabbath, but Passover. It was a day to rest. And so they waited. As Sunday morning approached, the women were anxious, restless, ready to do something, anything to confront their grief.

Our story begins on Sunday morning, early Sunday morning. And Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the Mother of James, and the other women are not gonna sit in their homes for one second longer.

They are determined to do the only thing that one can do after the death of a friend – they are determined to be present. They could not undo Friday’s headlines. But they could be present, both to one another, and to the friend they lost.

And so before the sun is even up, the phone tree has been activated, and Miss Mary Magdalene, and Miss Joanna, and Miss Mary the mother of James have mobilized the faithful women of their community to anoint Jesus’ body with spices and finalize his preparation for burial. Sunday is hard. And there is hard work to be done. And these faithful women will do the hard work of the church.

When the women arrive at the tomb, the stone has been rolled away.

When the women enter the tomb, they find that the body has been removed. The women are perplexed. Like someone who has lost their keys, they scan every inch of the space, retracing every step in hopes of finding the body.

Amusement turns to agitation. Agitation turns to anxiety. Anxiety turns to fear.

As the women pace the tomb, they are suddenly greeted by two men in dazzling white – some of kind supernatural beings. Angels maybe?

Our friends have experienced serious trauma and shock in the past forty-eight hours. They are in a heightened emotional state. And now, there are two strange creatures, dressed in dazzling white, standing in the middle of a dark tomb, at six in the morning. That would be enough to terrify anyone! Now add in grief and sleep deprivation.

Our friends do the only thing they know to do. They fall to their knees, bow their heads to the ground, close their eyes tight, clinch their fists, and brace themselves for the worst.

And as our friends kneel on the ground, waiting to be consumed by fireballs or other instruments of smite, they are surprised that after five to ten seconds, no atrocity has been committed. They are still intact, still safe, still breathing. Instead, they hear a question:

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

Our friends are still confused. Who wouldn't be? They are no longer fearing for their safety, but they have not yet let go of Friday's trauma. They saw their teacher die. And they've come to honor his body and to honor his life.

The two men continue: “Remember how He told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and crucified, and on the third day, rise again.”

And all at once, our friends are flooded with the memories of their teacher. In the Galilee, Jesus had healed Mary Magdalene and Joanna – in earlier passages, Luke tells us that the women were afflicted by evil spirits, what kind we'll never know. But I suspect that Jesus offered them relief from isolation or pain or some other burden that weighed them down. And in the presence of Jesus, these women were made whole. And in their wholeness, they responded with service and support. Luke's account tells us that they were women of means, and they contributed to Jesus' ministry with time, talent and tithe.

But these women were also reflective. They noticed that in Jesus' presence, there was always abundance: always enough to eat; always enough love and friendship to go around; always enough time to greet strangers, always ample hands to do God's work. They knew the

abundance of Jesus' presence, because they had experienced it for themselves.

And so here at an empty tomb, it is not the disciples that become the first witnesses of resurrection. It is a band of women – reflective, faithful, obedient, beautiful, intelligent, caring, serving, courageous, consistent, getting-it-done kind of women – women who served and loved and experienced and shared the love of God in the presence of Jesus.

Upon leaving the empty tomb, these women do exactly what Jesus intended every disciple to do: to reflect, and dig deep into his teachings. And so as they leave the empty tomb, they do just that. And in the community of believers, something extraordinary occurs to them:

Jesus is not dead! Of course Jesus has risen! Because God has vindicated Jesus, has unanimously approved of the way Jesus lived the human experience, pouring out all that was noble, all that was good, all that was a reflection of God's love, and giving those things to all he encountered.

And we know that God does not dwell among the dead in spirit, but rather God dwells among the living. Jesus is not bound to a tomb, nor is he bound to Rome's world – one dead to God, and dead to love. No! Jesus dwells among the living. And that is where we will always find him:

Jesus found us in Galilee – we were the disinherited and the dispossessed and the disenfranchised, but we sought to experience the living God. And Jesus found us. And if we want to find Jesus, we know just where to look. We will look for those, who just like us, seek life in a lifeless world.

Buoyed by their empty-tomb experience, and reflective walk home, the two Marys and Joanna and the other women share the news of resurrection with the disciples. It's fitting that the same women designated to do the hard work of burial preparation, and the same ones who followed Jesus throughout his ministry, and even through trial and cross, are also tasked with the hard work of telling unbelievable news. For surely, they had been in enough conversations with the disciples to know that their announcement would be met with skepticism. Our friends are not deterred. They continue the hard work of the church. And predictably, the disciples dismiss their claims.

I often picture the twelve disciples as observers or note-takers. They were so busy following Jesus, and trying to catalog the Good News he proclaimed, that they never made time to experience it for themselves. And because they hadn't really, truly experienced the presence of Jesus, they were ill-equipped to grasp the news of resurrection.

But the women are faithful witnesses. And even though Peter struggles to believe, something tells me he can't completely dismiss what the women have said. He knows their consistency. He knows their love for Jesus. And even if they are mistaken, perhaps, deep down, Peter knows he owes it to them to go and see for himself. And I have a hunch, he longs to experience what he knows they already have.

So off he goes, running as fast as his legs will take him. And he too, finds an empty tomb with linen clothes. And Peter is amazed!!!

And I suspect that for the very first time, Peter stops observing the presence of Jesus in his midst, and finally starts experiencing it. Peter realizes that good news is not something to be catalogued, and tucked away for safe-keeping. Good news is something to be experienced and shared. The good news of Jesus Christ is a living, breathing thing. And

when you experience it, it has the power to transform anything, even death.

Voila! Easter is born!

Eventually, all of the disciples will join the women, each person living into the calling Jesus has for them – they will not share a canned-story of Jesus, but rather, they will each share the unique story of how Jesus has shaped their own lives. And in such openness and vulnerability, little resurrections will ripple through the generations. Christ lives each time we dare to experience him for ourselves, and share our transformation with others.

Joyce Hollyday writes that the first women who followed Jesus had the courage to look past a broken present and believe in a future full of God's possibilities. I think they tended a garden of good news. In the fertile soil of Jesus' presence, they planted roots of faith – the God who was able to resurrect their lifeless lives in Galilee, is the same God who is eager to resurrect the lives of all who feel lifeless.

And I think those first women have left us a garden to tend. There are still stones to be rolled away, and bodies to anoint, and unbelievable stories to tell.

Easter will only remain Easter if we follow the path of these gardeners. The story of resurrection in our own lives must also be made manifest in the lives of all those we encounter. And the only way we can do that is to serve and witness like the women who preceded us.

Behind hospital doors and in funeral parlors, there is grief and pain we'd rather not confront – we have no explanation to offer, we have no blueprint to erase the heartache our loved ones feel. But we must be present, and we must seek to roll away the stone of despair.

In forgotten neighborhoods, there are hungry children, people without cloaks, and strangers seeking refuge, and yet we grow weary of trying to combat the endless cycle of poverty – it's too much work, and it might jar us from our comfort. But we must be present. We must anoint our neighbors with compassion.

In every news cycle, we hear a flurry of even more audacious laws and ordinances intended to ensure the least remain the least, and the most remain the most. And our silence is easier than action. But we must be present. And we must be willing to tell a new story, an unbelievable story – Ours is a community of faith where all are welcome, where all are called God's children, where all are offered the abundant life we know in Christ Jesus.

Friends, way down in the Galilee, Jesus brought life to lifeless women. One Easter morning, those lively women told a story full of life. And that story has left us a garden to tend. Let's help it grow.

For each time we do, we will find new life in familiar words. Christ the Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia. Thanks be to God!!!

Amen.