

Signs of Life

Luke 24:1-12; I Corinthians 15:16-26

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

The question posed to the women at the tomb was mystifying. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” The hasty burial on Friday prior to the Sabbath left unfinished the proper rites for Jesus. Arriving where he was interred, the women discover the body gone. And now two strangers, unnoticed earlier, inquire “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

The crucifixion was horrific. The rushed burial gave them no time to think much less grieve. Coming now with ritual spices, they approached to finish the final rites, to provide in death some dignity to the one they called “Lord” in life. They seek to bring closure to their relationship with Jesus.

Arriving at the tomb, they discovered something amiss: the stone rolled away, the grave clothes folded and set aside, the tomb empty. And now this confounding question, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

An execution, a tomb, burial spices, shattering grief – the signs of death were all around. “We are not seeking the living; we have come to bury the dead.”

Only as they are confronted by this disorienting question and are reminded of Jesus’ words, do they

understand: they are missing the signs of life! “He is not here ~ he is risen! Remember how Jesus told you, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

And recalling the words of Jesus, the women believed and ran to tell the disciples: “We have seen the signs of life! He is risen!”

Two thousand years later on this Easter morning, you and I hear the story told again. When we hear the women’s story, it can sound to us an idle tale. Scores of Easters have come and gone, and we have heard the story so many times before.

We know the tears of the women. Our loved ones have died, too. Contagion threatens, justice has miscarried, greed remains entrenched, the good is banished in defeat, truth is buried by lies. We hope against hope the Easter message is true, but we don’t see the signs of life.

Frequently we in the church plod forward and carry on as though we have come to bury the dead. Our eyes are clouded by heartache, keeping us from seeing the eternal purpose. Fear and sorrow stoop the soul from grasping meaning and fulfillment. Conflict and injustice grind down the human spirit, estranging us from our neighbors as well as ourselves. Tombs of missed opportunities, burial clothes of pride and arrogance: the signs of death are all around us still.

And the Gospel story again confronts us with the question: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

Are you and I seeing the signs of life around us? Or are we distracted by death’s intimidating demands, and preoccupied by defeat? The resurrection of Jesus transforms defeat and death into life. What appeared hopeless is altered into possibilities for healing and peace and reconciliation and love.

It is so important that we see the signs of life, that we hear the proclamation, that we get the message right!

Are you and I seeing the signs of life? If not, we must write in bold letters the word “LIFE” over whatever distracts us. God is intimately involved, and if God’s engagement brings life, you and I need to see it, acknowledge it, remember it, and participate with it!

I want you to imagine having a large paintbrush in your hand, and a bucket of bright colored paint. I’m choosing the color red, but you pick whatever is your favorite color! Now dip your brush into the paint and write the word L-I-F-E across whatever you see, whatever you encounter. L. - I. - F. - E. Easter is seeing the signs of life!

Over every situation, over every encounter, over every struggle and challenge and opportunity that we experience, we need to write in bold letters: L – I – F - E. “LIFE!” Resurrection means God engages our present

moment, whatever that may look like, and the world is filled with the remarkable signs of life, if we will just wake up to them!

Where might we see the signs of life?

When I get beyond all the distractions and really look, I find them everywhere. They need not be big and bold and flashy. They can be something we take for granted, as simple as dewdrops on a flower's petal.

I am reminded of the words of a great theologian of the 20th Century, Mr. Fred Rogers. You know Mr. Rogers and his neighborhood. Mr. Rogers said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" Those helpers are signs of life, aren't they? People checking on their neighbors. Calls to those who are homebound. Groceries put out on the street-side tables for those who have need to take. Shuttered restaurants cooking for displaced hospitality staff.

The previous congregation I served in SC had a devastating fire that marred its historic sanctuary and did 3 million dollars in damage. It was easy to be overwhelmed when we stood outside the chain link fence gazing at the mess. At first I didn't see the signs of life all around.

The reality was that scores of fire fighters risked life and limb to save much of the facility so that ministry might continue to take place. Countless volunteers rallied around to help and contribute. Do you see signs of life?

A friend posted on FaceBook in celebration of her mother's birthday. Her mother, probably in her 80s, was pictured with her daughters, and this description: "This is my mother a year ago on her birthday. You should know who she is... She started affordable daycare and preschools in my hometown, quit the women's social club when they voted not to allow African American women to join, and lost friends when she advocated for the rights of all within the church. She made home and life a safe place for Dad to live with Alzheimer's until only weeks before he died. Since then she's started grief support groups around town. When she sees a need she finds a solution. And she sings in the choir, takes senior learner classes at college, exercises, and beats almost everyone at backgammon. She's an inspiration."

I don't know this 80-year-old but I know her daughter. From the description she wrote of her mom, they are two peas in a pod. I see signs of life in people like them. I bet you know some folks just like them, too.

Our world is beset by greed and corruption, ineptitude and incompetence, evil and hatred and just plain meanness. We must paint the word "LIFE" over all that

because this is our Father's world, and God holds us in the palm of his hand.

At gas stations prices are really cheap now. What might the world "LIFE" painted over every gas pump mean to us? Perhaps it would be a reminder that we are called to be stewards, responsible users, and aware consumers of all the natural resources on which this world depends, and that God has given for sustaining life. Regardless of the price, careful stewardship promotes ecological responsibility benefitting the entire world.

Do any of you use the bank? Over every banking institution sign, we can paint in our mind the word "LIFE". Jesus taught that where our treasure is, there is our heart. Is it possible to see signs of life in the ways financial resources are employed so that the elderly are cared for and the sick are tended and every person who works full time earns a living wage including janitors and store cashiers and delivery truck drivers?

What about city hall, and state and national government? In our mind's eye, we can paint the word "LIFE" over every government institution. We don't do so to impose our faith on others, or because the church needs the government to prop up religious faith. No, accountability in the right use of power today anticipates a time when the new Jerusalem arrives; when in God's realm resources are shared with all rather than squandered by a few.

Can you see the signs of life now?

I see signs of life as we are all hunkered down in our homes, yet the season of Spring is not quarantined, it is blossoming all over our community! I see signs of life as medical workers and grocery store stockers and pharmacy cashiers continue to serve the public putting themselves at risk. I see signs of life as community organizations such as Gleaners redouble their efforts to provide food for the hungry in a time of radical vulnerability for the poor and food insecure.

I see signs of life in parents as they struggle to do the best for their children while providing for them financially, emotionally, educationally, and spiritually. I can see the signs of life in hospitals and clinics, among doctors and nurses and therapists and technicians as the drama of healing and restoration are enabled because of the gifts and skills and dedication of many.

Cancer, divorce, violence, corruption: these are not the final facts that determine our fate. Resurrection is the announcement that God has the final word about you and me and about our world. And that word is LIFE. And when we act on the basis of LIFE, we make a difference!

The tomb is abandoned. Why do you seek the living among the dead? Whether it is your insignificance or your sin, your skin color or your sexuality, your bank

account balance or your cultural ethnicity, your politics or your mental health: none of these exclude you from LIFE today among God's people and in God's kingdom.

I hope you can see it at every entrance to this church, if you look closely enough. And if you don't see it, then paint the word "LIFE" in your mind across every door because God bids us all welcome here!

Even in those most tender moments when we find ourselves at the graveside of our beloved ones, the words of Jesus comfort and bolster us: "I am the resurrection and the life! The one who believes in me will live!" Because we see the signs of life all around us, our tears of sorrow can be transformed into tears of joy!

Resurrection is not merely past history, something that happened to Jesus. Resurrection is not only a future hope against hope, something we wish will happen to us. Resurrection is life now, engaging us in God's mission of love and healing and restoration.

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here among the signs of death. He is risen, and you will find him in every sign of life!"

Thanks be to God!

I note with appreciation the use of the image of painting the word "resurrection" from a sermon by the Reverend James Lowry.

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