

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Walking Witnesses: In All the Wrong Places”

Luke 24:1-7

April 9, 2023

Last week if you were with us for our Palm/Passion Sunday, you’ll remember we read from Luke’s Gospel the account of Christ’s death on the cross, how he was buried, and how the women who were with him had seen where he was buried and had returned to prepare spices for his body, and how they rested on the sabbath day according to the commandment.

Today, that story picks up where we left off, a story many of you may have heard before, but it’s a story we’ll be following closely over the next few weeks, moving piece by piece through this final chapter of Luke’s Gospel, and it all starts with a story that might be all too familiar if you’ve been around a church much at all in your life, but also a story that no one, *no one*, was expecting to see played out that day many years ago. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ Luke 24:1-7

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

God of Life, we praise you for the good news of the resurrection, and we pray we would hear it and receive it anew this day. By your Spirit, we pray, breathe a new life within us, one that will not let faith sit idly but instead instill in us a life of grace, of love, of forgiveness, a risen life in a new kingdom. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Through an opening in the rock face, out of a tomb hewn in the rock, someone stepped into the light of a warm spring day. The sun felt pleasant on their face. A slight breeze made the trees around them rustle. And in the air sounded the chattering chirps of small birds in their branches. The new promise of a new day.

The sun was so bright it took a second for their eyes to adjust, but after a moment they could see someone. Was it two men in dazzling clothes? No. Rather, a line of people waiting their turn to go in and out of the same tomb.

As many of you know, a group of twenty-three of us were blessed last month to take a trip, a pilgrimage if you will, to the Holy Land. Powerful journey. Some of you have had the chance to do something similar in the past. Seeing the same square footage, the same landscape, the same backdrop, at least, where all these stories we read, these stories that I preach about, happened is an impactful thing to say the least.

Our own path took us through Jordan, then across the Jordan River into Israel, to Galilee, and to Jerusalem. And on a sunny spring morning, we visited a place known as The Garden Tomb. The Garden Tomb is not without its share of controversy. It offers an alternative to the sites of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, sites more commonly recognized and enshrined at the well-known Church of the Holy Sepulchre nearby.

Long story short, one of the features of that site, The Garden Tomb, was an intact tomb, hewn into the rock that to this day has not been greatly altered or had a church or a shrine built on top of it. Some would refer you to research by one archaeologist that dated that tomb to the 7th or 8th century BC, which would mean it would certainly have been around in Jesus' time, but wouldn't quite fit the description in Scripture as a new tomb in which no one had ever been placed. But nevertheless as part of the tour of this site, you have the chance to go into the tomb, to step through the opening in the rock, to see the risen stone surfaces carved out to the side where bodies would be laid.

And granted all the caveats and uncertainty of the site and the dating, at the very least you could somewhat safely say that Christ was buried in a place that looked something like this, in a setting something like this. It's a powerful place to stand, and you can't help but wonder if this could be the very spot where the women went into the tomb, and the two men in dazzling clothes—angels as they're called directly in another Gospel—appear and proclaim the good news for the very first time: "He is not here, but has risen."

Then after a minute or two in the tomb, it's time to go back out, and you step out into the sunshine and the rustling trees and the chirping birds, and when your eyes adjust you see the line of other pilgrims and tourists waiting their turn to go in.

There's something a bit counterintuitive about the scene at the tomb. For some of us who have heard this story many times, we might miss it. But there's something of a build-up of suspense when the women go back to the tomb. They wake up after the sabbath, get the spices and other materials meant to prepare Jesus' body, fully anticipating that everything would be as it was when they had seen him less than two days prior, namely, that his body would still be there, wrapped in a linen cloth, and laid in the tomb, undisturbed since Joseph of Arimathea had placed him there.

But that's not what they find. They see the stone at the entrance of the tomb not where it had been. And upon going into the tomb, they find no body. And even then, as they were stunned and puzzled by this, the most logical explanation they could consider was that someone had taken his body away, and the notion that what Christ had said time and time before, what the angels repeated to them just moments later, that he "must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again," didn't even cross their mind, or anyone else's for that matter.

Instead what they find is an empty tomb, and rather than new life, rather than inspiration, rather than spiritual epiphany, it produces confusion, maybe even fear. The empty tomb that they saw did not feel like good news to them.

It's only at the appearance of the two angels in dazzling clothes that the penny starts to drop. "He is not here. He is risen."

Later the same day that our group visited the Garden Tomb, we all went to the other, more commonly recognized site of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Walked the Via Dolorosa, the path, it is thought, that Christ was forced to walk with the cross on the way to his death, then into the church. The church covers under one roof the traditional sites for Christ's cross and Christ's tomb.

And there's a power to this place too, because no other place has as strong, as historical a claim to be the actual site of Christ's crucifixion, burial, and, if you believe it, resurrection. This square footage has been hotly contested, precisely because of what it claims to commemorate. The church has been destroyed and rebuilt multiple times over its centuries of history, each time reconstructing a place meant to lift the worshiper to consider these world-altering, history-shaping events, happenings that shape the lives and actions of billions around the world.

The church itself is somewhat dimly lit. A steady churn of people move about. Once you come to the area where Christ's tomb is thought to be, you see a line of people circling around a small, enclosed shrine in the center, a structure called the Aedicule, from an Old Latin word for "small shrine," and they were all waiting for their turn to go into the shrine and see the place, it is thought, where Christ's body had been placed, the very place from which Jesus, after lying dead, opened his eyes and walked out, risen.

But we didn't go in. We didn't go in. The inside of the Aedicule, so I've been told, is two small compartments that include what's left of a marble tomb that, again, is part of a church that had been destroyed and rebuilt a couple of times, and ultimately it apparently looks something closer to a shrine that, say, what we had seen earlier that day at the Garden Tomb. And the line, we were told, circling around it was a couple of hours long. So we didn't go in.

Still, though, this was *it*. The weight of the balance of evidence says this was *the place* where the resurrection happened, something that, if true, is the single most momentous event in history, not just from an historical, social influence-that-it-had-on-humanity sort of way, but from a cosmic, spiritual, truth-of-the-universe sort of thing. This was *the place*.

But for our group, when presented with the chance to stand in line and see it, it felt like a fairly obvious and easy consensus that, you know, we'll pass. And I've thought about that, because it didn't feel like a loss then, and even now I don't regret it.

Now, if the wait had only been twenty minutes, we probably would've done it. But I've wondered what that means, what that says about me. I mean, when I was a kid, without batting an eye, I'd wait an hour and half at Six Flags to ride Batman, but when presented the chance to go see the purported place where, if our faith is to be believed, the truth of life, of Christ, of God's purposes through his Messiah, all were confirmed, I and everyone else kind of shrugged and said, "Meh."

I've thought about that choice, quite a bit since coming back, but never with regret. I don't consider the Garden Tomb, the place that most likely *looks* closer to what it would have 2,000 years ago, to be a superior spiritual experience. I don't consider those at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre who were waiting in that line or those who have waited in that line or even those here who have waited in that line, who have seen that place, to have made a bad choice, because there is a power to that space.

But as it's been on my mind these past couple of weeks since we've been back, I can't shake loose of the words the angels said to the women when they came into the tomb: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

And there in the simple phrase that follows comes this odd, counterintuitive statement of the good news of Jesus for the first time: "He is not here, but has risen." That is, the good news to the women who came there wasn't that the tomb was empty. It's that Jesus was somewhere else...alive.

The good news isn't in seeking a tomb that is empty, but in seeking and following a Lord who is somewhere else.

But do we look for the living among the dead?

How many of us seek out signs of faith in that which could only bring us cynicism?

How many of us will wait in line for whatever the next thing is, a new job, a new degree, a new relationship, thinking *that*, maybe *that* will somehow bring meaning or fulfillment?

How many of us say we want faith or even that we have faith, but all indications in our lives point otherwise?

How many of us rest on faith that has long since gone stale, thinking something we kind of believed long ago has to count for something?

How many of us decorate our lives with faithful accessories and trinkets, thinking the appearance of faith might somewhere stir something else?

Do we look for the living among the dead?

Just this past week, Pastor Mark and I were in a meeting, our Congregational Life Committee, and Mark shared an idea he had had, a new ministry he had been considering, based around the simple premise of groups of people going on hikes together, like at the retreat coming up in a couple of weeks at Montreat. It's a wonderful idea.

But he shared that its inspiration comes from something that the founding pastor of our church, Julian Spitzer, used to do. He was known for walking the neighborhood, meeting those in the community, inviting them to join in fellowship and worship. It was the inspiration for this simple ministry of going out, of walking in creation, and the plan is to name it after Julian's son, Judd Spitzer, whom many of you know, calling it "Judd's Club." It's in the same vein as a number of our groups "Women Walking in the Word" that gather here in the neighborhood or over at Lakeshore each week. Nothing earthshattering.

But it speaks to this faith, to this good news that simply won't let us stay put, that seeks out life, and seeks out sharing it. Just as Jesus didn't stay there in the rock waiting to be discovered, neither did the women who had come to the empty tomb. They left, because it was something that had to be shared.

Friends, if this Easter, you find that you've been looking for life in all the wrong places, looking for the living among the dead, the answer isn't in setting some new destination, some new achievement, some new objective for yourself, or waiting in line just to see something that ultimately is hollow. Look not for faith, for life, among the dead. Save the trinkets, and seek a living, walking faith in the one who himself lives and walks, risen.

The good news of Easter isn't that the tomb is empty; it's that Jesus is somewhere else...alive, and a faith that follows him doesn't find its footing by staying put.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.