

## **“Look for Life instead of Death”**

### **Luke 24:1-12**

A premature announcement of a person’s death is not all that uncommon whether it is folks here in Divinity or more famous people whose deaths are reported in our media.

In recent years I’ve sat at the bedsides of Paul Klemme, John Smeets, Jim Howe, Sue LaPerna, and others who have been near death and who have fought their way back to life. We learn to never prematurely announce a person’s death when they’re still alive.

Exactly 50 years ago, a rumor began to fly around the world: “Paul is dead.”

The year was 1969, and many people were convinced that rock star Paul McCartney of the Beatles had died in 1966 and been replaced by a look-alike.

Music fans played a song from *The White Album* backwards and heard the message, “Turn me on, dead man.”

They listened to the song “Strawberry Fields Forever” and thought they heard John Lennon say, “I buried Paul.”

On the cover of the *Abbey Road* album, the four Beatles are crossing the street in what looks like a funeral procession. John Lennon is dressed in white like a heavenly figure. Ringo Starr, in black, is supposed to be the undertaker. George Harrison, in denim, is the gravedigger. And Paul McCartney, barefoot and out of step with the others, is the corpse. A Volkswagen in the background has the license plate “28IF.” Twenty-eight is the age that McCartney would have been, *if* he had survived.

The Beatles' press office quickly issued statements denying the rumor, saying that it was "a load of old rubbish." Paul was still very much alive, not killed in a car accident in 1966 after having an argument with his band mates.

On Friday of Holy Week, all the acquaintances of Jesus, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a safe distance from the cross and watched Jesus die (Luke 23:44-49). A righteous man named Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus off the cross, wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb. The women saw the tomb, and then they prepared spices and ointments to put on the body (23:50-56).

They wondered whether Jesus was dead.

Yes, he was. No doubt about it. Yes, a resounding yes. Jesus died on a cross. And when he was placed in a tomb, he was dead. Historically, the church has always considered any belief to the contrary to be heresy. Jesus had not fainted on the cross. He had not swooned. He was not in a state of suspended animation.

Jesus was dead. Jesus did not have a pulse. No brain wave activity. Nothing. Jesus was dead. He was so dead that the soldiers who were about to break his legs to hasten a death by suffocation, decided not to waste their time and energy on a dead man.

And remember, the people of Jesus' day lived with death. These were rough times. They knew what "dead" looked like. They weren't fooled.

His death was not just a rumor. This was not fake news. Jesus was quite emphatically dead, wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a tomb.

Then they rolled a massive stone over the entrance to the tomb, effectively sealing it. Even if there were a strong, alive man inside, that stone was going nowhere.

But it's a moot point. Jesus was dead.

On Easter morning, at early dawn, the women walked to the tomb with the spices they had prepared. They were expecting death, not life.

But when they arrived to anoint the body, they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. When they ran inside, they were unable to find the body, which left them perplexed (vv. 1-4).

Yet, their working hypothesis was still that Jesus was dead. It did not occur to them that he was alive. The women were like the people around the world who assumed that Paul was dead when he appeared on the album cover of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* with his back to the camera. All the other Beatles in the picture were facing the camera. On his shoulder, Paul wore a patch with the letters O.P.D., which were said to mean "Officially Pronounced Dead."

Was Jesus O.P.D.? Most — okay, everyone — assumed he was. It seemed like a logical assumption.

But at the empty tomb, two men in dazzling clothes suddenly appeared. The women were terrified and bowed their heads, while the men said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (vv. 4-5).

Was Jesus dead — *now*?

No, he was not, according to the men. "He is not here, but has risen."

The women were not able to absorb this news immediately.

“Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee,” the mysterious men in the tomb said, “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?” (vv. 6-7). The women began to recall his words, and to put together how both death and resurrection were part of the plan that Jesus had laid out for them.

So the women returned from the tomb and told this to the 11 disciples, as well as to the rest of the followers of Jesus. And it is significant, at this point, that Luke takes the time to identify the women by name, saying that “it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles” (vv. 8-10). This is eyewitness testimony, says Luke, made by women who are well-known and trustworthy in the community of Jesus’ followers.

But in spite of their testimonies, the women were unable to convince their friends. Their words seemed to the apostles to be “an idle tale,” and most of the men lent their words no credence whatsoever (v. 11). Only Peter ran to the tomb to see the evidence for himself, and then he went home, “amazed at what had happened” (v. 12), that is, that Jesus’ body was no longer in the tomb.

At the end of Easter morning, we are left with the question “Is Jesus dead?” Some people say yes, based on the fact that Jesus was not spotted by any of his followers in the vicinity of the empty tomb. If Jesus were alive, he would have been spotted by *someone* in the area. But he wasn’t according to the Gospel of Luke. Why? Because he was dead.

But let’s not ignore the testimony of the women and the two men at the empty tomb. These eyewitnesses make a compelling case for the resurrection of Jesus. Their words and actions teach

us that new life is not limited to Easter morning. Instead, it continues in our words and actions today.

For starters, *the resurrection is experienced whenever we focus on life instead of death*. The two mysterious men ask the women a simple but important question, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (v. 5). So often we look for death instead of life, as was abundantly clear when the “Paul is dead” rumor swept around the world. People are naturally drawn to stories of bloodshed and disaster and death, as is captured in the well-known maxim of news programming, “If it bleeds, it leads.” But one of the signs of resurrection is a focus on life instead of death, which the women show when they take the message of the empty tomb to the disciples.

The children’s television star Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, and his Christian faith infused all of his lessons. He kept his focus on the living, not on the dead, especially in situations of tragedy and suffering. One insight came from his own childhood when he saw scary things on the news. His mother always said to him, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”

“To this day,” he said, “especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers — so many caring people in this world.” As a believer in the resurrection, Rogers focused on life instead of death.

We also see resurrection *when we remember the full story of the life of Jesus*, from ministry in Galilee to crucifixion to resurrection. The two men in dazzling clothes told the story of Jesus by the empty tomb, and the women remembered it and acted on it. Even though some of the story is

painful, it holds together, and it gives us a pattern for understanding our own experiences of death and new life, as individuals and as a community.

Bart Millard is the lead singer of the contemporary Christian music group MercyMe. After his father died, he wrote a song called “I Can Only Imagine,” which explores what life in heaven might be like.

What the song doesn’t reveal is what a jerk Bart’s father was. For years, Arthur Millard beat his boy, sometimes three or four times a week. Bart grew to hate his father, and the two became estranged. At one point Arthur converted to Christianity, and then he developed terminal cancer. Bart decided to give his father a second chance at a relationship.

“My dad was a monster, and I saw God transform him,” said Bart. Their story was painful, and it took a terminal illness to bring the two together. But the end of the story is resurrection, including the reconciliation of a father and a son, and the creation of a Christian song that has given hope and inspiration to millions of people.

So, let’s stop looking for death instead of life. And let’s follow Jesus Christ as we seek to understand our own experiences of death and new life.

We believe that Jesus is alive and seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

But we also know that Jesus is not dead, because he is alive in us — now and always.

He is alive in us in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

May the peace of God . . .