

Easter: The right place to look for the living Christ! Luke 24:5b.

Reading: Luke 23:55-24:12

Introduction

Is there a household somewhere that is *not* looking for things? Where you have a dad and adult son living in the same house, my shirts forever seems to be "lost", but I know where to look for them - in my son's cupboard! Now it would be very foolish to look for it in the pantry, or the kitchen cupboard, wouldn't it? The chance of it being misplaced in my son's cupboard is just too big for me not to look there first!!

When it comes to Jesus, I'm afraid, we far too often look in the wrong place for the risen Christ, his conquering power and his saving grace! This morning we see Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James searching for Jesus, but they are looking in the wrong place, and in hindsight, a very foolish place.

The wrong place to look for Jesus

On Good Friday, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women "stood at a distance" on Golgotha Hill, watching the crucifixion and death of Christ (Lk 23:49; cf 24:10). Later they followed Joseph, from the Judean town of Arimathea, an influential man, and saw how Christ's body was laid in Joseph's tomb, by him. (Lk 23:55). "They went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment" (Lk 23:56).

The women were not allowed to do any work on the Sabbath, yet their minds were busy, all day planning what they would do on Sunday morning, the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath. They would get up real early. One would bring spices, another would bring clean linens, and yet another soaps, cloths and water and together they would go to the tomb where Joseph had placed Jesus. Once there, it was their plan to give Jesus a proper burial by washing and anointing his body, putting spices in the burial cloths, and then carefully laying his body back in the tomb.

These women loved Jesus so much. Jesus had taught them everything they thought they knew about God and his Kingdom. He had shown them the love of the Father. He had opened to them the meaning of the Scriptures. He had healed them and their loved ones. Many times he displayed his divine power. Because of love, they wanted to honour and respect him, by providing a proper burial for him.

Then it is daybreak on Sunday. You can almost see the women scurrying around, making final preparations. I am sure they asked the usual questions: "Did you bring the spices and oils?" "Did you remember the soap and cloths?" "Who has the linen?"

On the way they were still talking to each other. According to St Mark's Gospel, they asked, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb?" (Mk 16:3). And just as they were starting to become concerned about this, they arrived at the tomb and found "the stone rolled away" (Lk 24:2). They entered and to their immense surprise, the tomb was empty! The body of Jesus was not there!

They have come looking for the body of a dead Jesus. It had gone missing. What should they do now?

Then there was a bright light and two men in gleaming white robes standing before them. (Lk 24:4). They realised that they were angels sent by God. The women trembled in fear and bowed to the ground (Lk 24:5). Then the angels, the messengers of God, asked them: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

You can hear the reproach in the question: Why are you doing something so pointless? "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Do you not remember how he taught you that on the third day he would rise again from the dead?

If Jesus was dead, it made sense to look for him in the tomb where Joseph laid his body to rest. But the grave could not keep him. He is alive. He has risen. "He is not here," said the angels. "He has risen! Remember how he told you ..." (Lk 24:6).

Was there not one of the disciples, not a single one of his followers who remembered and who would rush to the tomb on the third day, in order to be witnesses of the greatest miracle, divine wonder, that ever occurred? According to the gospel writers the Roman soldiers witnessed his resurrection, but they were no followers of Christ and could easily be bribed by the chief priests to lie, and to say that his body was stolen. God could not find a single follower of Christ to proclaim his resurrection on that first Easter Sunday! God had to send angels to deliver the message! Those for whom Jesus died apparently forgot what he had said. Even those who loved him enough to give him the best possible burial, did not believe in, did not remember and did not expect his conquering resurrection power.

But when the Easter gospel was preached to them by the angels, they remembered. They really should have known! Jesus had told them what was going to happen, didn't he? How could they have forgotten? How could they be so foolish? Why do they look for the living among the dead?

The women were mortified by the angels! They should have known better! They were ashamed because they were looking for Jesus in a place where they should have known he could not be. They were looking for Jesus in the wrong place, in a tomb - and he is alive! He is risen!!

There are far too many people who like these women, do not live and act according to the gospel message: Jesus is alive!! The Palm Sunday crowds thought they would shortly see Jesus sitting on Herod's throne. These Jews and the disciples, like the women, were looking for Jesus in the wrong place.

Even today, too many who confess that they are Christians, look for Jesus in the wrong place. Not a place where his resurrection power is known, experienced and his true Kingdom is expected! In the gospel of prosperity we are told "believe in Jesus and your business will prosper, your children will be brilliant and your marriage outstanding! You will be healthy, and wealthier than you can even imagine."

Who can resist a pick up line like that!? But Jesus said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God ... But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort" (Lk 6:20,24).

Others look for Jesus in theologies where the living Christ is not present. Where, for example, the Holy Spirit, his power and gifting is preached and sought, but in a way of thinking that divorces the power of the Spirit from the power of almighty risen Jesus, who is the source of all power, authority and the sole ground and reason for every gift amongst God's children. They look for Jesus in places where a spirit is proclaimed who is not the third Person of the Holy Trinity! Where spiritual gifts are preached and sought for the sake of self-fulfilment or personal gain, and not to enable them to proclaim that Jesus was raised from the dead and that to him alone belongs all power and authority in heaven and on earth!

Run away from such a place! Flee from such a pit of death! If Jesus is not to be found in such a "spiritual place" and it is not a place where any Christian belongs! From which spirit do these religious people expect power and passion, if they do not expect it from the Spirit of the resurrected Christ?

Lets not be foolish! Lets not deny Jesus, not even in the most pious way possible! We have to look for Jesus in the right place!

The right place to look for Jesus

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" To find the dead, you go to a morgue, a funeral home or a grave yard. To find Someone whom you know is alive, you must look in the place of the living.

Jesus is not dead. He is alive. This means the women must have looked for Jesus in the place of the living: in Jerusalem, or in Galilee, or where his disciples were, but certainly not in a tomb.

Where must we look for the living Jesus Christ? We can start off with his church. It is within the church, with the people of God, that we can find the Lord Jesus. His power, his life, his Spirit, his love, his care and concern, his grace, his holiness, his forgiveness - is to be found in us, his followers. People should be able to look at the Centurion West Presbyterian Church and be able to find the living Jesus here.

Many do not want to look for Jesus in the church. "I believe in Jesus," they say, "but I want nothing to do with the church." They claim belief in Jesus but rarely attend church and never take on the responsibilities of church membership. They say that they confess Jesus, yet they refuse to live in the Body! In the Body of Christ we find fellowship with our living Lord and Head! Everyone should be looking for Jesus in the right place.

We are to see the living Jesus in the church at worship: a church singing, praying, praising, and testifying brings the living Jesus into view. We find the living Jesus when, like the women, we spread the glad tidings that he has risen (Lk 24:9,10).

We also see the living Jesus when Christians live as brothers and sisters in God's family. When believers are "like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose," (Phil 2:2). When believers "do nothing out of selfish conceit, but in humility consider others better than themselves," you see and can meet the living Christ (Phil 2:3). When Christians wash each other's feet, serving each other, you see the living Jesus. When God's children use their material and spiritual gifts for the service and enrichment of others, there too you see the living Jesus.

Where else are we to look for the living Lord? ***Jesus is in places where people – in his name – give cups of cold water to the thirsty, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, look after the sick, visit the prisoner, and look not only to their own interests but also to the interests of others*** (Mt 25:34ff; Phil 2:4).

I'm so very grateful that CPC, through her ministries, assists the poor and underprivileged of our community and others, teaching children, supporting the proclamation of the gospel. But there are so much more to be done! We need people to look after new visitors and seekers, leading the youth ministry, assisting the frail and home bound! We need even more of our members to fully take up their membership responsibilities and more visitors to take up membership - that we may show in the loving, passionate way we serve Christ, that he is alive!

If the living Christ is present in the church, then she looks for ways and means to love people. Much broader than our own community! When we believe Jesus is alive, we should show everyone that nothing is impossible with God! People are in need of compassion, companionship, and human contact. In showing this love we, and they, again see the living Jesus, present amongst us. We can thus find him, and so can others through our witness and service!

But we should also look for Jesus – the living Jesus – in our heart. If we only believe, then Jesus lives in us, making and shaping and moulding us to be like him. It is in a personal relationship with Jesus, that we finally and conclusively find the living Christ. We find him through the gracious work of his Spirit in our heart! We find him in our hearts when we are willing to glorify God, the Father.

How beautifully the age old hymn expresses the need to have a personal relationship with the living Lord.

*I serve a risen Saviour, he's in the world today;
I know that he is living, whatever people say;
I see his hand of mercy, I hear his voice of cheer,
and every time I need him he's always near.*

*He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.
He lives, he lives, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.*

Through our personal relationship with Jesus, we certainly also find him in heaven, seated at the right hand of God. And we, since we have been raised with Christ, set our hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. We set our minds on things above, not on earthly things (Col 3:1,2).

Conclusion

The women were embarrassed and ashamed, not only because they looked for Jesus in the wrong place, among the dead instead of among the living, but also because they did not take Jesus at his Word. They did not believe what Christ had said about his resurrection. They thought the cross and the grave spelled the end, even though Jesus had said otherwise.

Our doubt and unbelief disappear only when we take God at his Word. Our questions may remain, but they will remain within the context of faith, hope and love.

Do not you look for the living among the dead! Jesus has risen! “Remember how he told you ...”

This is the Word of God.

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

Amen.