



April 15-16, 2017  
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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *The Death of Death*

*Luke 24:1-12*

I wonder how many of you remember this commercial jingle from the sixties? "Fly the friendly skies of United!" Not so friendly, this week! As I was thinking about that very inconvenient video from this last week, I couldn't help but wonder if we have some here this evening/morning who feel a little bit like that doctor? Like they were dragged here kicking and screaming? If that is you, I just want to say, "Welcome! We're glad you are here. We aren't going to guilt you or chastise you. We welcome you and pray that the truth and power of Easter will capture your heart as it never has before.

There are four "gospels" in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Those are the short accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Every one of the gospels spends a great deal of time talking about Jesus' last days because his death and resurrection is the centerpiece of the Christian faith. This Easter morning I want us to listen to Luke's account of the moment that changed eternity.

To set it in context, let me just remind you that Jesus had been crucified on Friday morning at 9:00. After hanging on the cross for an excruciating six hours, he died at 3:00pm. Because the Jewish Sabbath begins at dusk, his few remaining friends hurriedly prepared him for burial. Then very early on Sunday morning, a handful of his faithful women disciples went back to the tomb to finish the job of properly preparing their Lord's body for burial. Listen to what they discovered.

*...on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel.*

*And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."*

*And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.*

Do you know what you are looking at? This is the traditional tomb of Jesus as I have seen it many times over the years. Technically, it is called an edicule, a shrine that was built around the tomb. This edicule sits inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It was once a rocky hillside outside of the walls of Jerusalem into which a tomb had been cut. Over the centuries, the hillside was chipped away until only the tomb remained, and then the church was built around it.

On March 22 of this year, nine months of extensive restoration was completed after 200 years of neglect. During that time, the marble slab that covers the original limestone bed upon which Jesus' body was laid was removed. A few workers and 30 Greek Orthodox priests laid eyes on Christianity's most sacred site, something not seen by human eyes since the 1500s and which will likely not be looked upon again for centuries. The edicule now stands without the ugly iron support beams on the outside. I am eager to see it in its restored state.

But this morning's text transports us back 2000 years to the time when Joseph of Arimathea had ordered a tomb to be carved out of the hillside for his family. Joseph, a Jewish religious leader, had become a secret disciple of Jesus. It was a courageous thing for him to ask Pilate for Jesus' body and a sacrificial thing to place that body in his own private family tomb. But it turned out to be a very short-term loan. Because when the women—notice, only the women were brave enough to return to the tomb: the earliest women disciples of Jesus will always hold a place of honor in the Christian faith—when they returned to finish the preparation of Jesus' body, all they found was an empty tomb, some grave clothes, and two men in dazzling apparel whom Matthew identifies as angels.

These angels greet the frightened women with a very interesting question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" How many thousands of times have I read this story, but this Easter I really pondered this question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

Here's one answer the women might have offered: "Because he *isn't* living. Jesus is dead. We saw it with our own eyes! We watched as he was brutally flogged. We watched as they forced him to carry his own cross to the top of the hill called 'The Place of the Skull.' We watched as they drove spikes through his wrists and heel bones, as they lifted him up and dropped the cross violently into the ground. We watched as he suffered for hours. We watched as he cried out one last time, 'It is finished,' and then breathed his last. And we watched as the Centurion—an experienced executioner who has killed hundreds others like this—drove a spear up into his heart, just for good measure.

"And when he was taken down, with our own hands, we bathed his unbreathing, pierced, and brutalized body, anointed it with oil, and wrapped it in grave clothes. So we *don't* seek the living among the dead. We seek the dead among the dead, so that we can honor him with a proper burial."

Do you remember the first time you saw a dead body? I do. It was my great grandpa in his coffin. Everybody was walking up to pay their respects. I didn't go. I didn't want to; it freaked me out. I stood near the back and all I could see was his nose—he had a big nose—peeking out over the

edge of the coffin. Of course, since then, I've seen a lot of death. I've seen suicides, car wrecks, crib deaths, and drownings. I've stood with families in emergency rooms as they said their unexpected goodbyes and had the honor of waiting with a person in his home as he drew his last breath and then closing his sightless eyes. Death is the great finality. So if I were with those women at Jesus' tomb, I might have expected them to say, "We *don't* seek the living among the dead! We seek the dead, for that is surely what Jesus is. Dead!"

But when you think about it, any disciple of Jesus might have answered this question in different way: "We seek the living among the dead, because that's what Jesus taught us to do." In January, there was a terrible avalanche in Italy that crashed into a ski resort hotel. We saw images of volunteers desperately searching for survivors, listening for the faintest cries for help, and then digging like mad. *They* were seeking the living among the dead.

This is why Jesus came to earth in the first place. On a rescue mission. Jesus didn't come to impress us with how good or clever he was. He didn't come to teach memorable parables that would be repeated again and again down through the centuries. He came to save us from a terminal disease that the Bible calls sin. "*For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not [what?] perish!*" That's how the gospel-writer John put it. And here's how Paul put it: "*...even when we were dead in our sins, [God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him...*"

It is not very culturally correct to say so, but every single human being suffers from a spiritual defect called sin. Sin tends to make us think and do the things that are destructive to us and to those we love. And most of all, to our relationship with God. No matter how hard we try, there is nothing we can do to cure ourselves of this illness. There is a sense in which we are spiritually dead, and we need someone to save us. The story of Jesus is the story of our rescuer in search of the living among the dead.

When Jesus saved a man called Legion who lived in the tombs and was filled with evil spirits, he was seeking the living among the dead. When Jesus walked among the dead and dying next to a Pool called Bethesda and asked a man, "Do you want to be well?" and healed him, he was seeking the living among the dead. When Jesus dared to touch the ulcerated skin of lepers who were the outcasts of their time—socially "dead" to even their own families—he was seeking the living among the dead.

It is impossible, of course. It made no sense to those women at the tomb. But calling death out of life is exactly what Jesus does. And it is what the disciples of Jesus do, too. By the power of the Holy Spirit living within us, we are called to be those who step into places of death and call forth life!

As many of you know, my daughter Rachel is in her last semester of seminary near Boston. She recently took a weekend trip to visit a remarkable woman in an area of Providence, Rhode Island known for violence and drug infestation. I'll call her Sarah. Sarah did not have a very promising start to her life. Sarah had her first child at 14, and then one per year for the next five years. One baby...per year...five years in a row...a single mom, 20 years old, five children. Trapped in a

dangerous part of the city filled with violence and drugs; not a very promising start at all. In fact, pretty deadly, wouldn't you agree?

Then Sarah met Jesus. **The living Jesus, not a dead, storybook Jesus.** She took seriously the fact that Jesus had died to forgive her sins—**all of her sins**—and that he had been raised to offer her new life. And she began to live in the hope and power of Jesus' new life. She began to talk about the difference that the living Jesus had made to her. Soon, people in her community were gathering in her home to hear more about Jesus. They formed a church. She became their pastor—a most unlikely pastor; this untrained, single mom with five kids in a dicey part of town.

But soon, she had three more babies. The babies of local drug lords. You see, she saw one of these drug dealers sitting in his car, supervising his pushers on the street. She walked up, opened the door, got in, and sat there next to this drug lord, telling him that that this was no way to raise his son. So, he started leaving his son with her on the weekends when he was busiest. His name was Shawn. Then another drug lord heard about this and HE started leaving his baby with her on the weekends. And then someone else. Sarah became mother to these kids. They call her mom. And on those weekends, Sarah is raising those children to believe that there is something more for them, something more than the culture of death that surrounds them. Life. But it is an uphill battle. Already, those little ones have been marked by that culture of death.

While Rachel was at Sarah's house, there was a mattress fire inside the home. They got the kids to safety and put out the fire, but the 911 call had already gone out. When the police car rolled up, three year old Shawn, the son of the drug lord, shouted, "It's the police. Everybody run!" For Shawn, police aren't there to help; they mean trouble for his daddy. And when Sarah calls out to him, "Shawn, what did Jesus do for you?" He replies at the top of his voice, "Jesus died for me...bang, bang, bang, bang." At first we might chuckle...and then we realize with horror that this little three-year-old knows way more about dying than any child should. And perhaps understands the sacrificial love of Jesus for him better than most adults ever will.

"Jesus died for me! Bang, bang, bang, bang!"

You know, when they restored the tomb of Jesus this year, they made one modification. They cut a little window into the inner walls that line the tomb. If you wish, a priest will open that window, and you can look at the literal stones that witnessed the greatest miracle in human history. We don't know how it happened; it is described nowhere for us. But sometime in the early hours of that Sunday morning, the Spirit of God came upon the dead body of Jesus. Perhaps the walls of that tomb reflected with warmth and light as the Holy Spirit did the work of restoration that only he can do. And suddenly, in an instant, dead lungs breathed and a dead heart beat and dead eyes fluttered and opened and the indomitable Lord Jesus came to life. The living...among the dead.

We may not face the kind of deadly circumstances that little Shawn or Sarah do. But there is not a person here who doesn't understand how deadly life can be. The death of a relationship. The death of a marriage. The death of a career or dream. Or, in the case of some here this morning, the literal death of someone you loved.

You can give up, you can surrender to the inevitable, you can continue seeking life in all of the dead-ends that have proven so destructive so far. Or you can lift your heart to the only one who has defeated death—the only one who can rescue you. And who longs to do so. The Risen Christ.

*Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen!*