

“Looking for the Living”***Luke 24.1–12******The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, Easter Sunday 2010***

I want to start with a statement you may find controversial: If resurrection is a one-off occurrence just for Jesus, then it is a 2,000-year-old event that can scarcely touch your life and mine. If resurrection is for all of us – for you and for me – then it is as important to each one of us as our birth. (Yes, I know, this statement is going to take some unpacking.)

Earlier this week, as I was praying with this passage from Luke’s gospel that (Sarah/George) read, the phrase that leapt out at me was the question the two men in dazzling garments asked the women who are the first to discover the empty tomb: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

On the surface, they are asking why these female disciples – who were part of Jesus’ innermost circle of followers – were trying to find the body of Jesus. But, it’s a question we ought to continue to pose for ourselves: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

I don’t know about you, but I don’t make a habit of poking around mausoleums. So, certainly on a literal level, this phrase is nonsense for us. Sometimes, we are hamstrung by the literal, and we need to release ourselves into the glorious freedom of the poetic, the metaphoric, the mystical meaning that goes beyond the merely literal.

To help with this I turn to an 80-year-old poet, a Guatemalan exile living in Switzerland, a woman who has stood up before death squads and defied them. Julia Esquivel is a woman who has actually looked death in the face, so she knows of what she speaks. Let me read you part of one of her poems, and I invite you to think both of Julia Esquivel and of Jesus:

“I live each day to kill death;
I die each day to beget life,
and in this dying unto death,
I die a thousand times and
am reborn another thousand times
through love.”

What are the forces of death among us? What are the manifestations of the culture of death we experience? I’m not talking about the natural course of dying: as living creatures, our bodies will cease to function. On the surface, we could say that right-wing death squads, Nazism, Stalinism, and genocide reveal to us the face of death. And to be sure, they do.

But there are softer faces, too — kinder, gentler aspects of the culture of death that lives among us and within us: fear, greed, secrecy, closed-mindedness, materialism, bigotry, self-righteousness, complacency, self-deception. And still, we find ourselves going into that “bad neighborhood” at those moments when we let our minds get the best of us. We lapse into being afraid of people who aren’t just like we are. We allow our need for material comfort to dominate our work-lives and our government. We glance away when we see a situation that makes us uncomfortable, because we know we have too much to risk making a difference. The softer faces of the culture of death are the ones that beckon to us, that invite us to sit down and rest and let our guard down. And those softer faces of death are every bit as lethal as a hydrogen bomb or a terrorist.

Why do we look for the living among the dead? What can Easter mean for us if we refuse to change our course and stop living in the culture of death?

“The Easter faith recognizes that the raising of the crucified Christ from the dead provides the great alternative to this world of death,” writes theologian Jürgen Moltmann.

“This faith sees the raising of Christ as God’s protest against death, and against all the people who work for death; for the Easter faith recognizes God’s passion for the life of the person who is threatened by death and with death. And faith participates in this process of love by getting up out of the apathy of misery and out of the cynicism of prosperity, and fighting against death’s accomplices, here and now, in this life.”¹

What are the accomplices of death in your life? They don’t have to be obvious, like great claps of thundering violence or injustice. What are the little things that eat away at your being? The small black holes in your life that suck the energy and light out of your personhood? And why do each of us continue to tolerate those within our lives? *Why do we look for the living among the dead?*

For too long, the Church itself has encouraged the faithful to walk in the shadow of death, because the Church has too frequently been an agent of oppression and fear, rather than an agent of liberation and love. For too long, the Church has been an accomplice in the culture of death. You don’t have to go very deep into the archives of the *Denver Post* to know at least some of what I’m talking about. How long will people tolerate obfuscation of the Vatican and their seemingly callous defense of known pedophiles? I heard a story on NPR’s “This American Life” on Friday night of a priest whose bishop continually sent him into parishes following the abuse of children, until he could take it no longer. He finally left the priesthood, because his conscience would allow him to do no other. And he came to work with a law firm that helped victims of clerical abuse, which has become a new ministry for him – he is *looking for the living among the living!*

How long will we tolerate the inequality of women in the life of the Church? How long will we continue to discriminate against our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender sisters and brothers? If I were a Roman Catholic priest and not a UCC minister today, I don’t know how I would answer that question: “*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*” But, I am a UCC minister and I need to ask myself and you: how do **we** answer that question when we see racism, sexism, and homophobia around us?

We humans have a tendency to settle for the status quo, to keep on keeping on, to trudge through life, when we should be **dancing!** Jesus didn’t say “I came so that people could worship me,” nor did he say “I came so that I could die for the sins of the world,” nor did he say “I came so that people would stop working for justice in this life.” Jesus’ words in John’s gospel are profoundly true: “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” There is nothing ambiguous about that.

We need to stop looking for the living among the dead. If our behaviors or substance-abuse issues are keeping us tethered, cut the bonds of death. Find a 12-Step meeting or a good therapist and *look for the living among the living*. If people in our lives are keeping us from living fully, it may be time to let them go and *look for the living among the living*. If your work is so mind-sucking and numbing that it is holding you back, it may be time for a change: *Look for the living among the living!* If your faith is so neutral and bland that it offends no one and changes no one (including yourself) then make a shift and start to *look for the living among the living!*

New life, new beginnings, and looking for the living among the living can happen...must happen... for us now, not simply in a past remembered, nor only in a hoped-for afterlife, but **right now**. Resurrection of the body may or may not happen the way the Pharisaic Jews thought it would two millennia ago, as a resuscitation of all of those who had led righteous lives. But on some level, it just doesn’t matter, because you and I are

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, from *The Power of the Powerless*, in *Bread and Wine*. (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing Co., 2003) pp.367-8.

invited right now to **look for the living** *among the living!* We are invited to live into transformed lives that make a difference not just to ourselves or our families, but to all of God's world around us.

One of the central messages is that the culture of death will not triumph in the long run, and that death is never God's final word. Too often, though, when Christians pin all of their hopes on an afterlife that will supersede the life they live today, they accept the life-numbing little deaths that we each face and instead of turning toward abundant life, they accept that which is unacceptable, whether it is poverty, lack of education, violence, injustice, or the diminution of the possibilities of the present.

The Easter faith, a living faith, is a profound trust that echoes the life, the teachings, the death, and the rebirth of Christ not just as a one-off 2,000-year-old event, but as a reality in the lives of people today. The Easter faith is not for one or for only a few, it is for everyone who is willing to make an incredible commitment to follow Jesus on the narrow way.

Christ is risen, and so are we. Alleluia! Amen.