

“Looking for the Living”

Isaiah 65.17–25 I Corinthians 15.19–26 Luke 24.1–12

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 8 April 2007

How many of us are really alive? I'm assuming that most of us here have a heartbeat and brainwaves, but how many of us are really, truly alive?

Paul writes in the first letter to the church in Corinth, “since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”

In the great story from Genesis, the ancient Israelites explained why people die through the archetype of the human being who is like us: Adam. And the assumption of this myth (and I use myth in the very best sense of the word), is that it didn't have to happen that way. And Paul gives sets before us the new archetype through which all God's people can be truly alive.

Millennia after the story of Adam, Pharisaic Judaism (yes, the same Pharisees that Jesus engaged in repartée) developed the idea of the resurrection of the dead as a way to explain how God would reward the righteous. (There was no sense of a heavenly afterlife in Judaism.) John Dominic Crossan writes that “for the Jewish and Pharasaic Paul, divine justice was necessarily about transfigured bodies upon a transfigured earth.”¹

For Paul and for other Pharisaic Jews the resurrection was not something that would happen to just one person, but to all the righteous. And it is in this milieu that all the accounts of Jesus' resurrection are recorded.

So, if you and I will die like Adam did, we also have the possibility to “be made alive in Christ.” And being “in Christ” is not something we have to suffer physical death to accomplish. Being “in Christ” is something we do here and now.

A few weeks back, we sang Luther's great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (which some of us learned by watching the Davey and Goliath cartoons in the 60s and 70s), but there was a line in the third verse that really struck me right to the core: “Let goods and family go, this mortal life also.”

Perhaps we don't need to die physically, but we may need to die to an old way of life in order to be alive in Christ. “In Christ” means that we have given our lives as disciples of Jesus. That's a tall order. Ours is not a low-commitment, Sunday-only faith. So, again I pose that question: *How many of us are really alive?*

Joan Chittister, a progressive and wise Roman Catholic nun, wrote an article a few years back with a title I love: “Easter Calls Us to Resurrection: Our Own.” *Are we alive in Christ?*



In Luke's account of the empty tomb, we meet two mysterious men in dazzling clothes, and we're left to assume that these are messengers (angelos) of God. And they tell the three women (Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Joanna), “He is not here. He is risen.” That three-word sentence is the shocking news that seemed unbelievable to all the male disciples, except Peter... “He is risen!”

Throughout Christian churches in every country, people greet one another on Easter by saying “Christ is risen!” and others respond, “Christ is risen, indeed!” In German, one says, “*Christus ist erstanden,*” and the response is: “*Er ist wahrhaftig erstanden.*” And in

¹ John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom.* (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), p.345.

French, the dialogue is “*Le Christ est ressuscité!*” (Yep, the cognate for resuscitated!) and the response is “*En vérité il est ressuscité!*”

I don’t know if you remember the Easter scenes in the film *My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding*, but everyone ran around saying “*Christos anesti!*” “*Alithos anesti!*” And because that language was probably among the first used to exchange this Easter greeting, I’ve printed it in the bulletin under the sermon title, so that we can exchange the greeting: “***Christos anesti!***” (“*Alithos anesti!*”)

But before they declare that Christ is risen, do you remember the rhetorical question asked by the two mysterious men in the tomb? “***Why do you look for the living among the dead?***”

How often have you looked for the living among the dead? I’m not asking how many times you’ve poked your head into a mausoleum to see if anyone was alive in there... I’m asking how frequently you’ve spent way too much time barking up the wrong tree.

- How much time have you spent in a career that perhaps pays the bills, but it numbs your mind and your soul?
- How many years have you spent trying to nurture a friendship that simply refuses to bear fruit?
- How long have you been using addiction as a substitute for real love?

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

All you have to do is turn on the TV or open a magazine or newspaper or drive by a billboard to see the valley of the shadow of death that you are being invited into. Every issue of *Newsweek* features a cool car – more often than not some hot car virtually nobody can afford – inviting us into envy and striving toward something that is ultimately unfulfilling. And then there is Oprah Winfrey’s website that asks that penetrating philosophical question: “Does your butt look big?” If you think a fast car and a small rear end will really make you happy, you may have chosen the wrong church to attend this morning. And if the superficial stuff doesn’t nourish us, why do we persist in spending money on it? ***Why do you look for the living among the dead?***

If you turn on the evening news, you don’t have to try very hard to glimpse into the valley of the shadow of death, if not the shadow of empire. How many refugees have died in Darfur? How many tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed since we went in? 3,000 young American servicemen and women killed in Iraq and Afghanistan? How about the \$503 billion price tag that our children will be paying for this war? Is this the legacy of 9/11 that we want to leave? ***Why do you look for the living among the dead?***

Joan Chittister writes, “Like the women at the tomb who until this moment have refused to imagine that life can be different, we have looked for the fullness of life in the wrong places: in things, in systems, in social approval, in money, in status.”² Before we can help affect our own resurrection, we have to help affect our own death to an old way of sleepwalking through life.

It’s time that Christians like you and like me stop looking for the living among the dead. We need to learn to stop and listen...to listen for the voice of God in places we may not expect to hear it.

For too long, people in mainline churches – even in ours – have been the standard-bearers of propriety, rather than prophetic witness. (The Beatitudes don’t say, “Blessed are the appropriate.”)

² Joan Chittister, “Easter Calls Us to Resurrection” in *National Catholic Reporter*, April 3, 2001

For too long, people sitting in mainline pews have been doing little beside keeping the bottom of the bench warm. That must change. (“The Parable of the Benchwarmer” never made it into the New Testament.)

For too long, we have regarded silence as the diplomatic route to communication. It is time for us to speak out. (Jesus’ miracles did not include removing the gift of speech from a prophetic youth.)

For too long, we have been getting a bargain called low-cost discipleship, where we coast along on someone else’s annual pledge or capital campaign gift. That is entitlement is changing here at Plymouth. (The Eleventh Commandment is not “Thou shalt be stingy.”)

I don’t know what the eighth-graders in our confirmation class are expecting to find if they become members of this church. Christianity is a hard path to follow. The cost of discipleship is steep. And each of us needs to make a choice about whether we will accept the invitation to be “alive in Christ.”

Marcus Borg writes that “The [Christian] path...is dying to an old way of being and being raised into a new way of being.”³ Dying and rising with Christ is something we do every day.



I return to the question I began with: How many of us are truly alive? Your resurrection *may* have something to do with what happens to your body after you die. But why count on that when Easter calls us to our own resurrection right now?

Looking for the living in the land of the living means working for God’s kingdom. For you, that may be serving the church as a Calling/Caring minister or working in the kitchen or teaching Sunday School or singing in the choir or being a witness for justice. There are more ways to serve than there are people in this church.

Looking for the living in the land of the living means understanding that the Christian journey is more than showing up at church. If you are “alive in Christ” your weekly Christian journey *begins* on Sunday morning...and it surely doesn’t end there. It is being willing to invest your blood, sweat, tears – and even your money – as part of your calling.

Looking for the living in the land of the living means finding the kind of wholeness in your spirituality that the folks on Madison Avenue simply can’t deliver. *Looking for the living in the land of the living* means that we are a countercultural movement, as Christianity always has been.



In your heart of hearts, ***you know where to look for the living***. In the depths of your soul, you know that it isn’t at the mall or on television. ***You know where to look for the living***. That is why you are here this morning.

On this Easter, perhaps unlike every other, may you look deeply within yourself and determine how you will conspire in your own resurrection. *Christos anesti! (Alithos anesti) Alleluia!*

Amen.

³ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), p. 93.