



WHY DO YOU SEEK THE LIVING AMONG THE DEAD?

Luke 24:1-12
Dan Claire
Easter Sunday 2014

Why do you seek the living among the dead? Luke 24:5.

Imagine what it must have been like for Mary Magdalene and the others as the angels asked them this question. These women had left before dawn to come to the cemetery, with their baskets filled with various aromatics they had gathered. They had been waiting to anoint the body of Jesus since Friday, but were not permitted to do so until Sunday because Saturday was the Sabbath. They came at the first possible moment seeking the dead body of their friend Jesus, so that they might do him one final kindness, by covering over the smell of decay with the smell of incense and perfume. Standing in a cemetery at sunrise, finding the stone rolled away from the tomb, they must have been either terrified or dumbfounded. Can't you imagine the look of absolute astonishment on their faces as the angels said, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He's not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you" that all this would happen?

Obviously, they didn't remember. Or if they did, they didn't believe what he had told them. In any case, it must have been an enormous surprise for them to find not only an empty tomb, but also angels rebuking them for forgetfulness. And apparently, the angels also were surprised to see them there, looking for Jesus in the wrong place.

Like any good story, the story of Jesus is filled with surprises. And not only do the surprises make for a good story, they also highlight the significance of Jesus' story. Over the centuries, countless thousands all over the world have believed Jesus' story to be true, and have found meaning and purpose in their lives because of it. In what follows, we'll recap his story all the Gospels do, in terms of his life, his death, and his resurrection. As we do, I hope you'll see that the importance of Jesus is bound up tightly with the surprising turns in Jesus' story.

JESUS' LIFE

For someone with such humble beginnings, isn't it amazing what Jesus was able to accomplish?

The Gospels tell us that Jesus was from Nazareth, a small village in Galilee, many miles north of Jerusalem. He was born to an unwed mother and a father who was a construction worker of some kind. Though a distant descendant of King David, Jesus' family had no status or privilege in the 1st Century AD. Yet as a man in his early 30's, Jesus had an amazing ministry that lasted over a period of several years. All the eyewitness accounts confirm several things about him:

GATHERING SUNDAYS AT 5 PM AT 801 NORTH CAROLINA AVE. SE, WASHINGTON, DC 20003
2000 P ST NW, SUITE 410 WASHINGTON, DC 20036
REZCHURCH.ORG | INFO@REZCHURCH.ORG | 202.573.8586

- Jesus was a brilliant **teacher**, who drew thousands to listen and learn from him.
- He performed countless **miracles**, incl. feeding the multitudes who came to hear him.
- He was a powerful **healer**, who even raised adults and children from the dead.
- He was a courageous **advocate** for the poor and the disenfranchised, speaking out against discrimination and injustice perpetrated against both the rich and the poor, men and women, Jews and Gentiles.

Over and over again in the Gospel stories, people responded to Jesus with surprise, because his looks were deceiving. It doesn't matter that some 700 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah foretold that it would happen this way, that the Messiah would come and that he would have "no stately form or majesty, that we would be drawn to him, no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2). That doesn't matter, because few if any of Jesus' contemporaries remembered Isaiah's ancient description. Rather, they kept asking, essentially, "How is it possible for this commoner from the countryside to be doing such extraordinary things?"

It's a bit like the Superman story of our day. No one suspects Clark Kent, the unremarkable midwestern farm boy, to be the guy with the superpowers. We know what Superman looks like, and he certainly doesn't wear a sports coat and glasses. Likewise, in Jesus' day, they would have expected the Messiah to be tall and handsome, with a noteworthy pedigree and a royal entourage.

So the story of Jesus' life is surprising. The people of the time must have thought, "For a man with such humble beginnings, isn't it amazing what Jesus is able to accomplish? But Jesus can't be the Messiah, the Savior of the world, because he looks too ordinary, too normal, too *human*."

JESUS' DEATH

For a man who did so much good, isn't it shocking how badly his life came to an end?

For all but the most cynical, Jesus' passion and death are a scandalous miscarriage of justice, shocking in their brutality. All the eyewitnesses report that:

- Jesus was betrayed at night in the Garden of Gethsemane by a trusted friend, Judas Iscariot, the treasurer of his movement. (This, of course, is a very unhappy surprise.)
- The Jewish religious authorities gathered a midnight tribunal, and though they all agreed that they wanted him dead, they couldn't find a charge against him that would stick.
- Peter denied Jesus three times, and the other disciples fled.
- The religious leaders delivered Jesus to the Roman occupying force, and demanded that he be executed by the Romans. Against his better judgment, the Roman governor, Pilate, caved in to special interests, throwing justice to the wind, and pardoned a murderer, while sentencing Jesus—a man he deemed innocent—to death.
- The next morning, Jesus was scourged and tortured, stripped and mocked. Then he was crucified and died that afternoon.

By sundown on Good Friday, the thousands of people who had heard Jesus' amazing teaching, and who had benefitted from Jesus' amazing miracles and healing, and who had experienced

first-hand his vision for inclusion and justice—all these people were left dumbfounded by the news that the ordinary man from Nazareth had come to a shockingly tragic end.

Think of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, another man with humble beginnings who accomplished so much good in his lifetime, and still had quite a lot more to do when his life came to a tragic end. Likewise, after all that Jesus accomplished in just a few years, his death is so very sad and disturbing. How could a man this good have come to such a horrible, horrible end?

But this, too, is something that the Prophet Isaiah, among others, foretold. Seven hundred years before Good Friday, Isaiah described it in this way: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:5-6).¹ The reason these words from Isaiah are so important is that they explain *why* Jesus had to die, namely, that Jesus would die as a sacrificial lamb for our sin. The Bible in countless places describes our relationship with God as one that has been broken by our choosing autonomy rather than fidelity. We’ve chosen to go astray; we’ve turned—every one of us—to go our own way, which is how we define “sin.” It’s treason against the Creator, and treason is always a capital offense.

In his mercy, God provided a way of pardon and forgiveness through Jesus, and this is where his being so normal, so ordinary, so *human* becomes absolutely essential. Because Jesus is our look-alike. The Bible teaches that he was tempted in every respect as we are, yet was *without sin*. And so it was that Jesus could be our substitute, being put to death not for his sin, but for ours. Years later, the Apostle Peter explained it this way: “[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.” Then he went on to quote the very same ancient passage from Isaiah: “By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). That’s the point of Good Friday. Jesus died for us. He paid the penalty for our treason. Our sins were laid upon him, and he became our sacrificial lamb.

Have you ever been confused for someone else? On occasion I’ve been mistaken for another person, but it’s always been a happy accident. At different times strangers have asked me for my autograph, thinking that I’m a Major League baseball player, or a famous theologian. But I’ve never been on the bad side of a case of mistaken identity. One member of our church who is black and in his twenties shared with me that he has sometimes been stopped and held by the police as a suspicious person. Can you imagine how terrible it must be to be stopped and held for a crime you didn’t commit, just because of your skin color, or the way that you’re dressed. Imagine standing in a line up of lookalikes, while the victim of a crime studies you and considers whether you’re the perpetrator. Though innocent, your whole life and future hangs in the balance. The victim’s poor attention to detail could end up costing you your life.

The crucifixion of Jesus is at one and the same time both the saddest and the happiest case of mistaken identity in human history. It’s the saddest, because an innocent man was put to death

¹ One of the reasons why the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran is such a watershed is because it proves that Isaiah’s clear predictions about the life and death of Jesus were written long before, and not after, the time of Jesus. The beautiful precision with which Isaiah described Jesus’ life so many hundreds of years beforehand is simply inexplicable apart from the hand of God.

for crimes he didn't commit. It should have been us. On Good Friday, each of us should have stepped forward and said, "You've got the wrong guy. He's innocent. I'm the one you're looking for." In *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean courageously did this when the police arrested another man for his crimes. But not us. On Good Friday, we *didn't* step forward, so Jesus was punished and executed for our treason. Jesus' death was the saddest accident in all of history. They crucified the wrong man. It should have been you and me.

On the other hand, Good Friday also represents the happiest of all mistakes, because Jesus did it willingly, and he did it lovingly, to save us from sin and death. The Apostle Paul writes that "God shows his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). During Jesus' life and ministry, he repeatedly told the disciples that this would happen, and it was the primary reason for his life and ministry. For example, when one of the religious authorities secretly came to Jesus by night to ask him to explain his ministry, Jesus told him that he would be crucified so that whoever believes in him might have eternal life. How can this be? How is it possible that everyone who believes in Jesus can be pardoned from sin and reconciled with God? Through this happy accident of mistaken identity, Jesus paid our debt in full.

So it turns out that there's a surprise within a surprise in the story of Jesus' death. Yes, it's sad and shocking that this good man's life came to a sudden and violent end. But what's even more surprising is that it was intentional. Jesus chose to sacrifice himself in our place, as a gift of love for you and for me. He already paid the full price in order to give us this gift. Why wouldn't anyone want to receive it?

JESUS' RESURRECTION

For a story that ends just as he said, why is everyone still surprised?

Now let's return to where we began, with the surprise of Easter. Mary Magdalene and the others were surprised that morning to find not only an empty tomb, but also a couple of incredulous angels. The angels asked, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" as if it were pure folly for these women to be looking for Jesus' corpse in the tomb where they laid him on Friday.

Meanwhile, the angels were surprised that the women were surprised, asking essentially, "How could you not have seen this coming?" After all the good that Jesus did, and after all the times he said that he would be crucified and rise on the third day, they wonder why nobody believed him.

Here's what I believe is the reason for the disconnect between the women and the angels: they come from different dimensions. The angels reside within God's kingdom *as it is in heaven*, in a realm where there are no coincidences, no accidents, and God's presence and activity are always clearly evident. The women had not yet seen the *kingdom come*.

The angels live in the real world; we live in the shadowlands. They always see Jesus transfigured; we only snatch glimpses every now and then, because our world is broken by sin, our vision is clouded by sin. We often misjudge situations and people, having to go back and review the details and evaluate our conclusions, to see where we went wrong. The angels, however, see God at work in and through everything, all the time.

On that first Easter morning, the angels saw Jesus' story truly, because they had seen God at work in it from the very beginning. Of course Jesus rose from the dead, because God always keeps his promises. The women, on the other hand, couldn't see clearly, so when Jesus rose from the dead they were completely surprised.

Over the years I've heard many people tell their stories of coming to faith in Christ. One of my favorites is by a university professor and research scientist who was an atheist prior to becoming a Christian. He says that when he came to faith in Jesus, he went outside and began to see anew all the intricacies of the universe in a whole new way—no longer only formulas and systems, but also the beautiful artwork of the Creator. One day on campus at the university where he is a professor, he stopped to look at some flowers and began laughing aloud at the grandeur and beauty, because now he saw them truly as God's handiwork. A grown man, a distinguished professor, laughing like a child out of the sheer joy of coming to see the world as it truly is.

We all would be laughing aloud if we could see God's activity in and around us all the time. While I love the happy surprise of the empty tomb on Easter, I also believe that its surprise should remind us that we don't see the real world as the angels do. The Apostle Paul prayed for the Ephesian church that they would have the eyes of their hearts opened, so that they would be able to see God's handiwork in all things (Eph 1:18-23). I pray the same thing for our church this Easter. We need to see the world as it truly is—seeing God's majestic and glorious activity all around us and especially in the events of our lives. It is no mere accident that you're doing what you're doing now. God has brought you to this moment, out of the cemetery, in order to find the risen Lord Jesus among the living rather than the dead.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ is risen from the dead. Happy Easter!