

April 11, 2004

"WE ARE WITNESSES"

Acts 10:34-42; Luke 23:23b-24:12

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

"And they rested on the Sabbath." The faithful, courageous women from Galilee rested on the Sabbath. Friday, they'd stood with Jesus' mother and watched her son die. Their dreams died with him. They watched Joseph, a government official and friend of Jesus, take Jesus' body down from the cross. Joseph wrapped his body carefully in a long linen cloth. He placed Jesus' body in a tomb carved into a limestone wall.

It was nearly time for the Sabbath to begin. The women went home and prepared spices and ointment. When the Sabbath was over they'd go back to the tomb and complete the grim task of Jesus' burial. They would unwrap his body, then rewrap it folding in the spices and ointment.

"And they rested on the Sabbath."

Early Sunday morning at the crack of dawn, they returned to the tomb. That's how Easter Sunday begins in the gospels. No trumpet fanfare, not joyous hymns, no inspiring sermon, no "Halleluiahs Chorus." Easter began in the dark, quietly, at a tomb in the presence of death.

We're uncomfortable with death on Easter morning. In fact, most of us are uncomfortable with death most of the time. We live in a death-denying culture and most of us spend lots of time working at prolonging our lives. We exercise, diet and medicate. We keep death and dying at an arm's distance.

Craig Barnes says his grandmother's generation wasn't uncomfortable with death. In fact, they talked about death all the time. After all, death is a stubborn fact of life. Her generation, Barnes says, talked about death a lot, but never talked about sex, especially in public. These days, we talk about sex all the time and seldom talk about death.

Barnes suggests a great way to ruin a dinner party. Start a serious conversation about death! People will check their watches and suggest the baby-sitter's curfew is at hand.

Well, you can't read the Bible and avoid the subject of death. From beginning to end, the biblical story tells of countless humans who were born, lived and died. Death is the natural consequence of birth. And since we're all terminal, the Bible suggests we should prepare for death.

To tell the truth, everything in our world is temporary. Our relationships are temporary. Our careers are here and then gone. The houses we live in will someday be gone. This church building will pass away. We are mortal and we will die.

The rest of the world understands mortality better than we do. But in our culture, we hide dying, deny mortality and sanitize death. We spend lots of time trying to turn back the process of aging. When death or terminal disease strikes close to home, we sober up briefly and get serious about living. But soon we forget get back to "normal."

The fact is, no matter how much we exercise, medicate ourselves or eat right, we're terminal. We will die. We live in a temporary world that is passing away.

The women from Galilee knew that. They surrendered their hopes and dreams to harsh reality Good Friday afternoon. They'd placed their lives and destiny in Jesus' hands and he died in front

of their eyes. Some of those dreams were religious dreams. They died too. This is not what they bargained for when they decided to follow Jesus. It never is. Religious dreams die, too.

"BUT, on the first day of the week," the story says. The story begins with death, decay and the inescapable fact of mortality. BUT, HOWEVER, NEVERTHELESS.

The Christians story is God's great "nevertheless." Our story, each of us, the world's story, is death, decay and disappointment. God says to you, me, the world, "NEVERTHELESS...."

When the grief stricken women arrived at the garden tomb, the large cylindrical stone that covered the cave entrance was rolled back. Shocked, they looked inside. Two men in dazzling clothes were in the tomb. They were terrified. Hold that thought – "terrified."

They fell on their faces in fear. "Why do you look for the living among the dead," the men said. "He's not here. He's risen. Remember? He told you this would happen."

The women remembered. They rushed back to where the disciples of Jesus were hiding. (Who knew who was next on the death list?) They told the disciples what they'd seen and heard.

"What, are you nuts?" The disciples dismissed the women's witness as silly Sunday morning woman talk.

But Peter rushed to the tomb to see for himself. He, too, found the tomb empty. Peter went home amazed. "What happened?" he wondered. Hold that thought, too. Peter wondered what happened.

By the end of the day, a few of Jesus' disciples saw Jesus here and there. He was appearing here and there. That night he suddenly appeared in the room where the disciples were hiding. "Peace," Jesus said. The disciples were "terrified." I told you to hold that thought.

Then, it seems, everything began to change. A few years later, in Acts 10, Peter boldly addresses a Roman Centurion and his household. God sent this man Jesus, Peter said. Jesus was a good man who did good things because God was with him. His enemies killed him, but God raised him from the dead. I am a witness. And if you believe in him you will become part of what God is doing to change the world. Believe it – or not!

So what happened? What happened to change doubtful and skeptical disciples into bold witnesses? How did terrified men and women become faithful preachers who changed the world? There's clearly more to the story.

It's far more than that some people saw someone they thought was dead. The New Testament does not say that God raised Jesus up to his old life. He didn't recover from death and head off to do what he'd been doing for three years.

No, God reached down into Jesus' tomb and lifted him up to new life. On Easter, God reversed the flow of life toward death and decay. The resurrection of Jesus introduced something radically new into this old dying world. God did some extraordinary in the middle of all our ordinary living and dying.

And, the New Testament declares, God is reaching down into the tomb of this world and raising people up to new lives. God will reach down into your life and mine and create a new life smack dab in the middle of our old lives.

And that's terrifying. It's terrifying because to have this life you have to stop clinging to your old one. "Stop looking for the living among the dead." Stop obsessing about your career, your success and your status. It's part of the old terminal world and won't last anyway. Stop looking for the living among the dead.

Give up your dream of a great life, free of anxiety, pain and distress. It won't happen and, besides, it's all temporary. Stop looking for the living among the dead.

Stop your mad search for happiness, some life, some imaginary world free from sadness. Stop looking for the living among the dead.

Stop clinging to your old life and turn to the risen Christ. Cling to him. It's the only way to have God's gift of new life.

Craig Barnes continues the story about his grandmother:

My grandmother, the one who was comfortable around death, freely accepted her imperfect body. She was a large woman, and didn't care. Since she was free of that anxiety, she could devote herself to things that were eternal, like cherishing God, her family, mission work and fishing. She laughed easily, most of the time at herself, and enjoyed all her days. She was fully alive because she had already given God the life she couldn't keep anyway. (*Christian Century*, April 6, 2004)