

April 23 24, 2011

Easter Sunday!

Luke 24:1 -12

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

I didn't know it at the time, but one of my first glimpses of resurrection faith came in high school when I made a new friend. Jerreeann Sigrist became a friend of mine when we were juniors, through my best friend, Carol. And the three of us, together with Jerreeann's family, grew to be very close.

Jerreeann, Carol, and I spent hours at the Sigrist's home. Or we'd go shopping together. To the movies. We ate together – went out or cooked at their home. Their family was a gospel singing group. On weekends they traveled to churches in their motor home and gave concerts. Even as a devoted Lutheran, I went along on a few occasions.

Part of what drew us so tightly together was that Jerreeann had cancer. I remember being confused and scared by some of the differences between their theology and what I had grown up with. But I now know that what drew me to them and what allowed me to tolerate the theological conflicts was that I had a unnamed, but powerful sense that they knew God, that their God was an passionate cheerleader for life, and that they knew that God was right there with them in wanting Jerreeann to live a long, fulfilling life.

"But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

Here we are 2000 years later, celebrating Jesus' resurrection, and we've got the same life-loving God. In the sometimes life-denying ways of our world; our faith, our God, our risen Christ call us to be passionate cheerleaders for life. God taps us on the shoulder, and asks us why we insist on looking for the living among the dead. Why we sometimes forget to live our lives as people of faith.

All along this Lenten journey, these 40 days, not counting Sundays, since Ash Wednesday, Jesus has been trying to teach us to look for living. The first week of Lent we heard about Jesus in the wilderness, battling with temptations that can deny life. The next week Nicodemus, a faithful Jew, came to visit Jesus at night, trying to understand faith. Jesus tried to teach him how to live from his heart, and not just his head, to be born from above. The week after was a direct contrast to

Nicodemus. We met the non-Jewish, Samaritan woman at the well. She accepted Jesus' gift of living water and ran back to her village to share the good news with everyone. The next week Jesus confronted the nasty belief that our suffering is God's punishment for our sin. That certainly keeps us from living life as God intended. He healed the man born blind. Then two weeks ago we met Lazarus, who had died, and Jesus brought him back to life, urging us to free ourselves from anything that keeps us from life, that binds our lives. On Palm Sunday we got to celebrate Jesus' life and teachings with his first followers. They recognized the work of God in him. You left here this past Thursday evening to Jesus' words of blessing the bread and cup, to the words of Judas' betrayal, and Jesus' crucifixion. Yep, during Lent we've had a crash course in looking for the living.

I have a favorite quote from Vaclav Havel – the Czech playwright and first president of the Czech republic after the fall of Soviet rule in 1989. Havel's quote goes like this,

**Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.**

And if I might take liberties with Havel's thought and substitute "faith" for "hope" it speaks even more powerfully to me - **Faith is not the same thing as optimism. It is not a child-like belief that life will turn out well, but the certainty that it is inherently good and has meaning, regardless of how it turns out.**

That describes the kind of faith that my friends, the Sigrists, introduced me to. The kind of faith we need so often when senseless, tragic things come into our lives. It's the kind of faith that Jesus' resurrection calls us to. That faith doesn't call me to explain what happened to Jesus between Friday and Sunday. Whatever happened was life-changing enough for a small group of people that we are left with this new covenant, with 4 gospels, lots of letters, and a vision to describe Jesus' life and resurrection. What you and I are called to do is find the risen Christ here and now. To look for the living. Something changed the lives of those women, of those disciples, and something has changed ours. The living Christ. He showed us a God who is a passionate cheerleader for life. We believe because we live. Because life is so awesomely wonderful. Because love is so incredible. Because we are not alone. Because we never know where the risen Christ will turn up next. That's how and why we believe.

What grabs me about this gospel reading, in addition to the obvious, is that question that the men at

the tomb asked the women who came to care for Jesus' body, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" We do the same thing. We look for life, for hope, in things that can't give it. If we try to make meaning out of our lives only through our careers or our looks or our status, the cool stuff we have, we won't be satisfied. If our friends don't share our values, if we hold on to anger, letting old hurts fester, being too afraid to experience life, or unable to let go of self-destructive habits - then we are looking for the living among the dead. We haven't fully met the resurrected Christ.

My high school friend Jerreeann died before we graduated. It was so hard. Of course her family was devastated. And I believe God wasn't thrilled with the outcome, either. But believing in the resurrection isn't about God magically curing cancer or reaching down to stop tornadoes or car accidents before they happen. Believing in the resurrection is about living each day knowing that life is inherently and powerfully good, that it has meaning no matter how it turns out. Jerreeann and her family showed me that side of faith. Their faith didn't make their life easy, but it gave them strength and joy and meaning and the knowledge that their lives, their daughters' lives, were surrounded by God on this side of life and on the other.

Easter, the resurrection, shouts out the force of life. Life as God created it is so driven, driven toward love, toward all that is good. Jesus' resurrection shouts that even physical death doesn't stop life.

This Easter Sunday and every day, as Jesus' followers we know that death is not the last word to life. We know that it is only with God and each other that we can begin to survive the death of loved ones. Faith in God, in the resurrection, is not the same thing as optimism. It is not the simplistic belief that life will turn out well. It is the certainty that life is sacred and has meaning, regardless of how it turns out. God's force for life is everywhere. It's not hard to look for and find the living in the beauty of spring and in this church. It's when our lives get in a rut or get downright tough that we need to hear Jesus ask us, "Why do you look for the living among the dead." This day and every day, life is indeed good. Life is indeed God's. Believe in the risen Christ. Look for the living this Easter and every day.