

Text: Luke 23:53- 24: 12 Luke's Resurrection account, Ezek 37: 1-14 Valley of the Dry Bones
Title: "Why do You Look For the Living Among the Dead?"
Date: Easter Sunday April 24, 2011

I don't know if you caught the Time article this week- "What if There is no Hell?" OK, this time of year they always try to put something Easter related and now they have a readymade controversy to pick on. Rob Bell wrote a book called Love Wins, in which he wonders aloud that Hell might not be eternal- and people have been going bonkers! Really? Really? Ever since Jonathan Edwards kicked off the First Great Awakening with a sermon called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", where he painted vivid pictures of God holding us over the fiery pits of hell by the scruff of our necks; we have been fascinated by Hell, I think for 2 reasons. We are forever measuring ourselves against the other guy, as in, I can only be doing good if I am better off than the next guy. And then there is the snark factor- I told you what would happen, but you didn't believe and now you are going to pay! There is something about Bad NEWS that simply draws our attention.

Luke goes to great lengths to demonstrate that there was enough bad news to go around. In a handful of days, Jesus had gone from being hailed as the Messiah from the crowds to being betrayed by one of his closest friends. He had been dragged before Pilate, then Herod and then back to Pilate who declared him innocent. However the priests incited to crowds to call for Jesus' blood and rather than face a riot, Jesus was condemned and handed over to the Romans to be tortured and then crucified.

All of his disciples had scattered in fear of their lives. It was the women who witnessed the merciless moonscape of Golgotha- heard his last words "it is finished" and stayed while others fled the sudden mid day darkness. Luke explains that Joseph of Arimathea had gotten permission to bury the body, rather than leave it to rot and be picked over by carrion birds. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, Jesus' mom, and the other women watched at a discreet distance as Joseph wrapped the body in linen cloth; followed him to the cave like tomb; and made sure Jesus was in the tomb when the stone was rolled, sealing it shut. Being women they had work to do- to mix together

what was needed to prepare the body for interment- but Sabbath intervened and they had to stop. Jesus is Dead. Bad News all around.

Now it is early dawn, they approach the tomb, already noticing that the stone had been rolled away. They have no reason to believe that this is going to be anything but bad news. Now we have the benefit of having seen umpety ump ghost story/ zombie movies. We know that if you see an open grave- nothing good can come from going inside. But they go inside anyway. Luke doesn't have the vocabulary to relate the double take- WHERE'S THE BODY? They knew he was dead- there were there! They knew he was wrapped up and placed in the tomb- they saw it all. They knew that this was the right tomb- for they followed Joseph of Arimathea making sure. WHERE'S THE BODY? The possibilities were rather limited. They knew that they didn't have it- and what possible motive could the authorities have for stealing it? They are too stunned to be afraid- *but that is about to change.*

Suddenly 2 angelic beings appear, flanking them. Forget fear- now they are terrified- the absence of the body was weird enough- but the presence of supernatural beings?!? They are over the edge- this can't be good. No bed to hide under- the floor of the tomb will have to do. Don't look up. Whatever you do- don't look up!

The angels, taking all of this in ask the pivotal question, "*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*" Time to convert fear of bad news into experience of Good News- JESUS IS ALIVE!!!- don't you remember what he told you before? He told you step by step what was going to happen- and now it has! Now they can connect the dots- now dread is turned to praise. Bad News is transformed to Good News. What do you do with good news- you share it of course!

So they high tail it back to the disciples- only to be blown off. Luke tells us that they considered it "an idle tale." It's not like the men can call them liars (would anyone of us here want to call Mary a liar?) Nah, they are just women- they can't help themselves. You just want o shake the men and say "don't go down that path!" but the fact remains that the rest of the disciples treated the earliest witnesses of the fulcrum event of history as someone who was just yanking their chains....

But Peter isn't sure. He goes back to the tomb, peers inside and sees the abandoned burial clothes-and wonders. No one, if they were going to steal the body would unwrap what would be by now a bloated rotting mass. This just doesn't add up....

Notice that he doesn't believe-yet. He is still wrapped up in Bad News, and fear. But then neither do the rest of the disciples. Even the women who had witnessed the drama from beginning to end needed angelic help to put 2 and 2 together. So we can forgive them their stunned unbelief.

Would we have done any better in their place? I don't think so. We've know the Gospel for over 2000 years and still we get obsessed about Hell- and don't kid yourself- that is BAD News. The Good News is that God so LOVED the world; that He GAVE his only son, that everyone who BELIEVES in him may not perish, but HAVE eternal live. God loves us, enough to come in person and meet us in the midst of our brokenness. Let's not kid ourselves- we are broken- for vey broken relationship, every frustration, every longing that is not met or good impulse that is not followed through on, amid all of our hypocrisies- we discover yet again that we are not as whole as we would like to be. We can see the good, reach out toward it, but in the end our own self centered, self destructive sinful natures trips us up. If it wasn't so painful it would be almost funny. THIS is where God meets us, and it is here that we are healed and restored.

The Promise or the Resurrection is nothing less than the Promise, not merely of new life, but of being recreated from the inside out to NEW LIFE! Call it eternal life, call it life a life worth living, a life empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring God's blessings to all we hold dear and then some; call it whatever you want. Jesus, by rising from the grave validates all of his promises to strip our old sinful and disappointing natures away and discard them- like so many dried up snake skins. We no longer have to have to look for the living among the dead- for we are beginning to experience eternal life in the here and now. Yes, part of the Gospel is about Judgment Day and the promise of heaven; but we can leave the future in God's hands- for He is Lord of the Future as well.

Christ promises are sure and the Resurrection is the ultimate validation of his authority. But the fact remains that if we do not unwrap the gift of new and eternal life now, it's almost as if we didn't get it in the first place. When Capt Cook sailed into Botany Bay, it was reported that the Aborigines did not see his ship in the harbor. It was

there all right- its just that it did not fit into any of their preconceived categories- and so they failed to process it. It was for them- not there. This is not a day to talk of Hell, this is the day we get glimpses of Heaven.

Let me close with the promise found in Ezekiel:

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

The women at the empty tomb needed the angels to help them see past what they expected to see. Luke tells us later on in the chapter that Jesus himself stood before Peter and the other disciples to solve the mystery of what happened to his body. The question, "*Why do you seek the living among the dead?*" is just as timely as it was on that first Easter. And so is the answer- "***he is not here- he is Risen***". And because he has- we are able to see with new eyes to the New Life that is ours as a result. **He is Risen- He is Risen indeed!**