

*Based on Luke 24:1-5.*

It has been a long, dark night.

It has been the bitterest of winters, as iron-fisted devils rule the land: bumbling brutes who deem themselves secure with their pomp and their pride.

We come toward a tomb of death, with spices in hand, with heartbreak in our bones, suffering body, grief-racked soul. Only to find, the stone rolled away. The body gone.

We come for closure; instead we confront a question: *Why do you look for the living among the dead?*

We are as perplexed as the women. We know what brought this tomb to be. We know what landed Jesus there. We know the power of the cross to torture and to maim. To silence and to demoralize.

We know the kind of twisted pageantry that crucifies. We see it unfolding in our midst right now. We see the spectacle of power dressed in patriotic colors and sanitized language. We see the flag-waving that comes with cross-building. We see the tyranny that teaches us to kneel, not in prayer but in submission, with law-firms and universities, and in the halls of Congress.

We know the darkness plumbing our depths, and we have seen this theater before. In first century Roman Jerusalem. In 19th century slave auctions right down the street here in Shepherdstown. In 20th century border walls and 21st century campaign rallies. In court filings today and the aftermath of the January 6 insurrection. We have seen the twisted pageantry that crucifies.

We are right to be afraid.

The crucifying power of authoritarianism does not just silent dissent. It puts on a show. It punishes compassion and rewards subservience. It buries the truth and delights in bearing false witness. It steamrolls all that would stand in its way.

We know exactly what the tomb is. Not just the death of a leader but the death of a movement. A long dark night with no sign of tomorrow.

But tomorrow it is. A brand new day it is. Unexpected. Almost accidental. But unmistakably real.

Branches bursting forth in blossom. A sparrow taking flight. A stone rolled away and a dazzling brilliance and a rhetorical question: *Why do you look for the living among the dead?*

Why do you look for freedom in the hands of Pharaoh? Why do you look for healing in the halls that peddle harm? Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread? Why do you look for truth in the mouths of those who bury it?

The question is not a rebuke. It is a call to *reorientation*! It is a mandate to look for the living *even when—and especially when*—all hope seems lost.

Looking for the living is a *decision*. To stop rehearsing evil as if it is the end of the story. Looking for the living is a *determination*. To stop embalming what God is resurrecting. Looking for the living is a *commitment* to look again with fresh eyes. And again. And again. Looking for the living is a *choice*. To see the light of a clear blue morning; to see the light of a brand new day.

This is the Easter promise before us today: in the midst of what continues to unfold in our collective long, dark night, that is in many ways only just beginning, we still have a choice. Yes, we must look for and acknowledge the crucified. AND we must insist that something holy WILL rise from the wreckage.

This is not denial. This is holy defiance!

This is an uprising of what is real and enduring and alive!

This is the two and a half hour Seven Last Words service at Asbury United Methodist Church on Friday: holding the ache of crucifixion together—singing, praying, and downright testifying, yes, even yours truly got downright Pentecostal—not to glorify the suffering, but to insist even here, God will not leave us lost, disconsolate.

This is the frantic phone call six-year old Abigail Barnett to her pastor this week, eyes wide, voice strong, fire in her belly, demanding to know: *Why did they kill Jesus? He didn't do anything wrong!* Refusing to normalize injustice, refusing to accept this is just the way the world is, demanding of us that we make the world better for her and her generation.

This is the senior Senator from Maryland making his way to a prison in El Salvador to stand with the disappeared, to name the names of the exiled, to unmask the evil of deportation unto death, to tell the truth in the face of slander, to speak up when it is safer to stay silent, holding the victim in the wound of his pierced heart.

This is the crimson whisper of the cardinal that lit on my windowsill as I wrote this sermon, a messenger from the heavens, preaching *I am with you, sister!*

This is coming to the tomb with our spices and our sadness and walking away not with answers but with a holy fire in our hearts. This is planting gardens in the ruins, this is daring to shout *Alleluia!* with tears still in our eyes, this is refusing to let cynicism have the final word in the sanctuaries of our souls.

This is lifting up the trans child, whose very breath is an act of defiance. You have a name that shines, imperishable! This is comforting the grief stricken mother, who refuses to stifle her pain. You have a throne! This is cradling the activist on the edge of burnout with the conviction, *Your story is not yet finished.*

This is tending to the embers of resurrection when the world wants to stay stuck in the grave. My joy, it is spring! This is love and light and life!

Today, on this Resurrection Sunday, we choose to *look for the living!*

In the protest, we choose to look for the living. In the pew, we choose to look for the living. In the demanding questions of our children, we choose to look for the living. In the boldness of our senators, we choose to look for the living. In the cracked earth where lilies still grow, we choose to look for the living. In the red-robed prophet perched on the windowsill, we choose to look for the living.

Tyrants are mist! Their palaces are dust! Their soldier's march surrenders to the sun!

Christ is Risen!

Christ is Risen Indeed!