

April 20, 2025, Easter Sunday  
Rev. Dr. Katherine Willis Pershey  
“He Is Not Here”  
Luke 24:1-12

The story begins with women moving in darkness, at the cusp of dawn, when the heavens were surrendering to the light of a new day. Maybe the sky was streaked with pink and laced with cirrus clouds. Maybe it was silent and cold as they retraced their grief to the tomb. Maybe they whispered to one another as they walked, but I doubt it. What was there to say? Just days before they had witnessed the brutal killing of their friend and teacher, a man who spoke of God as his Father. Jesus was dead. They couldn't undo the violence that had been done to his body, but they could anoint his lifeless limbs with sweet smelling spices.

The story is so familiar we could nod and smile as if it's a rerun of a favorite sitcom. The body is not there. The tomb is empty. You really have to lean in close to catch the details. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have unique perspectives from start to finish, and nowhere is this more pronounced than in the way they recount the first Easter morning. Of course, the takeaway is the same. They all ask us to believe that Jesus was dead but is dead no longer. They all ask us to believe that he is risen. The particulars of their proclamation vary.

Matthew kicks things off with an earthquake, after which the women nearly run headlong into Jesus as they rush off to report the news to the disciples. John gives us a weeping Mary, begging the Gardener to tell her where they've taken the body, only to realize that the Gardener is the one she's looking for. In contrast, Mark and Luke's versions of Easter morning are subtle. So subtle that the indicator of the miracle is the empty tomb. The proof of life is the lack of a dead body. In their accounts of the first Easter morning, Jesus is an absence, not a presence.

The Resurrected Christ does appear around late afternoon in Luke's story. But at daybreak, Luke gives us a deserted tomb, and two men in dazzling clothes. We presume they are angels, though if I were Luke's editor, I'd note in the margins that he could be clearer here. We did meet the Angel Gabriel in Chapter 1, after all.

I have a confession to make: I have never paid much attention to this part. As much as I love the gospel of Luke – and I *love* the gospel of Luke – I get to his Resurrection story, and I can hardly bear a Jesus-free Easter morning. What's more, it doesn't feel fair to the women. They had not fallen asleep while Jesus was praying. They had not betrayed or denied him. They had mourned and wailed when the soldiers made him carry the cross. They had stayed to the bitter end and watched his body laid in a tomb. Where is their beautiful reunion with the Risen Christ?

I'm impatient. I don't want to wait to see Jesus until after the disciples do not believe the women. I do not want to wait to see Jesus until after Peter has his private moment of trust. So, I flip to Matthew or John. Or I skim ahead. Give me Jesus in the Garden. Give me Jesus outside the tomb. Give me Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Just please, for the love of God, give me Jesus.

It reminds me of the worst Children's Easter message idea I've ever heard.

The idea was that the preacher should hold up a beautifully decorated Easter egg and say that it contains something amazing - the best gift in the whole world. You know the kids are imagining delectable treats. If I'm one of the kids, I'm thinking it contains a Cadbury creme egg with not one but two yolks - if it can happen in nature, it can happen in the Cadbury hatchery. But when the preacher opens the egg, there's nothing inside. The kids are supposed to be spiritually mature enough to get it. *He is not here, he*

*is Risen.* You guys, the kids need something to hold onto – something to taste. Not just a metaphor.

The Resurrection may be the best gift in the whole world, but it's a tough one to receive when you don't yet have anything to show for it – when your grief is heavy, your anger is inexhaustible, your fear is unbearable, and your most important relationships are strained by hurt and distrust.

*We're not just talking about the women anymore.* There are people in this room who are in pain. Our nation is in pain. Our world is in pain. There are too many crises to name. We live in “realms of death” and it is so easy and so terrifying to believe that death wins. I know a pastor who says that if death wins, it is the most powerful thing in existence: “If death wins, God does not exist.”<sup>1</sup> We may not have the faithfulness and audacity of the women at the tomb, but they are there on our behalf. And through them we overhear a question, a proclamation, and a reminder that speaks good news to the heart of this bleak terror.

*Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.*

I have a friend who does not dress in dazzling clothes - more like fleece pullovers from LL Bean. But he has the wisdom of angels. “God is not among the dead,” he says. “Not because God is not near death, but because God in Jesus Christ is so inside death that death can't stay death anymore... And that is such good news.” It's not that we don't still live with pain; it's not that we don't still keep company with loss. We grieve, but not without hope. We sin, but not without forgiveness. We suffer, but not without salvation. We die, but not without knowing we will rise in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Fitzgerald, *Bury the Graveyard* (unpublished essay)

Death doesn't win. It isn't the most powerful thing. God not only exists but exists in the best possible way. It doesn't get better than Jesus, friends. He is so good. And my favorite thing about my least favorite Resurrection story is that the angels let Jesus speak for himself. *Remember? He told you this would happen.* And it did.

If something so wild and wonderful as resurrection is true, it gives new weight to all the other things Jesus said and did. Like how he dared people to love their enemies and had the audacity to forgive people for their sins. Like how he welcomed children and called out hypocrisy and healed the sick and fed the hungry. Like how "the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, because he was anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set free those who are oppressed."

Here's the great irony: Jesus may be missing from Luke's version of the first Easter, but the good news of every gospel is that through Jesus, God is present. Never absent. And because Jesus is not in that tomb - because God destroyed death by raising him from the dead - he is not done teaching and forgiving. He is not done welcoming children and calling out hypocrisy and healing the sick and feeding the hungry. He is not done upending poverty and removing shackles. He is not done overcoming affliction and resisting oppression.

And because we are followers of the Risen Christ, neither are we.