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“Looking for Life” GPPC 3-27-16
Isaiah 65:17-25, 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, Luke 24:1-12

A few years ago when Beth and I lived in the suburbs outside Cleveland, Ohio, I signed up to run a 5K race at a nearby horseracing track. I'd never been to a horseracing track before. Have any of you ever been to one? It's a little different than a church, isn't it?

As usual for any race, the other runners and I arrived early to pick up our bib numbers and race t-shirts, hydrate, and make about ten nervous stops to the restroom. The race course had us take a lap around the horserace track, head out into the parking lot, and then finish with another lap back on the track. Before the race, a number of us also warmed up by running around the parking lot. (It seemed to stretch about a mile, at least by a nose.) All of a sudden we heard a car alarm going off—beep, beep, beep, beep. I thought it would stop pretty soon, but it didn't. The alarm was coming from a Cadillac in the lot. A very large man in a dress suit was fiddling around with the dashboard and yelling and cussing up a storm. But the alarm kept going—beep, beep, beep, beep. I warmed up a little longer, and then finally risked going

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over to try to help. The guy exuded just a whiff of menace and he was furious. “Can you (fill in cuss words) believe this?! Do you know how (fill in more cuss words) to turn this (cuss words) alarm off?!” Well, I didn’t drive a Cadillac or know much about cars. But I looked for a few seconds at multiple buttons. Finally, I said, “What if we pressed this one?” And I pressed it. Silence. It worked! “Thanks,” the man said, and then more cuss words. This guy was a good cusser.

I went inside the lobby to stretch with some of the other runners. The place smelled like old cigarettes and spilled booze. I noticed the track workers rolling their eyes and looking at us runners with something between amusement and contempt. I’m not trying to pick on racetracks or other gambling establishments really, but later it hit me. What if you spent most of your days at a place like this? Would it nurture your soul? And where do you go and what do you do to nurture a soul anyway?

Luke says the women went to the tomb on the first day of the week. All four gospels tell us the women were the first witnesses. But in

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some churches these days women are not even allowed to be ordained.

Don't they know women have been leading the church for ages?

The men were nowhere around. But the women came and brought spices to put on the dead body of Jesus. How they planned to move the gravestone from the tomb, we don't know. But the stone was already moved when they arrived and the women were "perplexed." Right. Perplexed.

And then without warning, two men in dazzling clothes, (Luke's understated way of saying angels) stood beside them. The women were scared half to death, and bowed their faces to the ground. But the smarty-pants angels delivered this zinger, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Great question.

And where do you and I look for the living among the dead? In deadly bigotries or fatal attractions or noxious environments? In poisonous cynicism, toxic worry, or unchangeable past mistakes? What destructive habits are mortally wounding us and we need to change? What addictions are killing us and we need to address? Are there people

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in our lives who basically suck the life out of us and we need to set better boundaries?

How are we looking for life in death? Let's pray for God to help us see and then enable us to change. Let each of us leave this Easter service today determined, with God's help, at least in one area to stop looking for life where there's only death. Let each of us reflect on our lives and pray for God to work in us in at least one way to choose what's life-giving, not death-dealing.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" asked the angels. "He's not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you that he would be handed over, crucified, and rise on the third day?" And then they remembered.

Funny thing about remembering. You have to know the story before you can remember it, right? Only people who've first learned the story can remember the story. We learn the story again and again in worship and Sunday School so that when the crucial times in life come we can remember. When we endure terrible suffering, we can remember.

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When the wrenching ethical decision is thrust upon us, we can remember. When we need courage to face our fears, we can remember.

The women remembered. They went back and told the apostles. But the apostles did not believe. They thought the story was just an “idle tale,” a bunch of baloney. They didn’t believe.

But Peter got up and ran to the tomb. Why did he run? He ran because the news was urgent. He ran because he needed to decide for himself what had happened. He ran, looked inside the tomb, just saw some linen cloths by themselves. No body there. And Luke says, “He went home, amazed at what had happened.” It doesn’t say he went home with faith. It doesn’t say he went home believing. It says he went home “amazed.” Later, Jesus made resurrection appearances. But here he left an empty tomb. The resurrection of Jesus is the most important event in history. And it leaves us with questions.

What do you and I believe about this empty tomb? Are we amazed? Unimpressed? Apathetic? Or something else?

The Apostle Paul moves beyond amazement to faith in Christ and the resurrection. He says, “If we’re only hoping in Christ for this life

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right now and nothing beyond it, then we're the most pitiful people on the earth." Notice Paul does not say, "Now that Jesus was really quite the lecturer, stimulating, profound, and graded on a curve. He was a great teacher, but that's all." Paul does not say that.

He says, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who've died." Funeral director and writer Thomas Lynch says, "What if, rather than crucifixion, [Jesus] opted for suffering low self-esteem for the remission of sins? What if... he'd raised his personality, say, or The Idea of Himself? Do you think they'd have changed the calendar for that?... Easter was a body and blood thing, no symbols, no euphemisms, no half-measures." (Thomas Lynch, quoted by Thomas G. Long in *Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral*, 35.)

Or as Professor Tom Long puts it, "A Christ whose resurrection occurs only in our minds has no right to call us to put our bodies on the line for justice." (quoted by Shawnthea Monroe in *The Christian Century*, March 16, 2016, 22.)

In the Apostles' Creed we say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." And when we say that we're joining Paul and the church

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universal in declaring Jesus was really dead and he became really alive again in a new kind of body. We don't know exactly what that body was like. But one scholar says, "No New Testament writer...ever depicts the resurrection of Jesus as if it were a mere resuscitation or a return to a former mode of natural, terrestrial existence..." (Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, 1538.)

What do we know about Jesus' resurrected body? He had a body that existed in time and space, yet his body was no longer bound by time and space. Jesus was distinctive and recognizable and not just absorbed into some holy life force. And he was able to be with others in community. And he still is, forever.

Paul says, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." In other words, he's the forerunner for the rest of us. We are also going to be resurrected. And maybe our resurrected bodies will be like Jesus'—distinctive, recognizable, boundless, and in community forever. How wonderful would that be? And there's more.

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Paul says, “From Adam we’ve all received death. But from Christ we will all receive life.” In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, our sins are forgiven. Our death sentence is cancelled.

And Paul says, “It happens in this order. Christ is the first resurrection, then those who belong to Christ. And then comes the end of time, when every ruler, every authority, every power is destroyed so that God will reign completely. God’s will will be accomplished utterly. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death.”

Paul says every ruler, every authority, and every power other than God is destroyed. No longer will rulers and their armies, terrorists and their bombs hurt and kill God’s people. No longer will authorities make citizens quake behind closed doors or even enact legislation that oppresses others. No longer will there be powers that pollute the environment, keep people hungry and thirsty, take away human dignity and human rights, send people to die in war. No longer, because God alone will be in charge. God’s justice and mercy will reign.

Jesus’ own life of justice and mercy is vindicated in the resurrection, and in the resurrection so will the lives of persons who

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have tried to live that justice and mercy. Followers of Christ sometimes receive amazing courage that compels them to put their selves and their bodies on the line to work towards God's justice and mercy, because they trust in the resurrection to come. As one writer reminds us, "Perpetua, [the early Christian saint], being beheaded by a novice swordsman who cut her several times unsuccessfully, witnesses to her contempt of death by directing the sword to her own neck." (Charles Hoffacker in *Weavings*, Jan/Feb. 2005, 30.) After all, she knew death will be destroyed.

Resurrection is something beyond ordinary words, actually beyond any words at all. But a character in one of Wendell Berry's novels gives us at least an inkling when he says, "It was the thought of Heaven...an unimaginable thought of something I could almost imagine, of a sound I could not imagine but could almost hear: the outcry when a soul shakes off death at last and comes into Heaven... that shout of limitless joy, love unbound at last, our only native tongue." (Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 268.)

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The tomb is empty. Christ is risen and by God's grace we will be too. So we look for life in the places and people and actions that nurture our souls. We give ourselves, our lives, for God's justice and mercy.

And we wait for the day when we shake off death, give a shout of limitless joy, love unbound, our only native tongue. Amen. ©Jeff

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