

Looking in the Wrong Place

Several years ago I came home pretty excited. My husband Joe and I were leaving early the next morning on a trip. After dinner I began to pack. (Of course Joe had finished packing the day before.) Then I noticed that my keys weren't hanging where I expected them to be hanging, on the hook in the kitchen. So I began looking for my keys. I looked on the kitchen counters, I looked on my dresser. I looked on my desk. I went out and looked in the car. They were in none of the places where I would have expected them to be. Then I got serious. I looked in the trash cans. I looked under the sofa cushions and under all the chairs. Finally, about midnight, I gave up and went to bed. Well, we went on our trip and came back and I looked so more for those keys, to no avail. Finally, two weeks later, I opened the vegetable bin of the refrigerator and there, under the onions were my keys! I'd been looking in all the wrong places! But can you blame me? Who would look for their keys in the vegetable bin?

It turns out that the women who went to the tomb were looking in the wrong place, too. That's what the two men (two angels?) in their dazzling clothes implied anyway. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they ask. But can you blame the women? They had lost the key to life's meaning. They had watched, with horror and grief, Jesus' death, they had seen Joseph of Arimathea and the others take his body from the cross. They had followed and seen which tomb he was buried in. Then they'd gone back and prepared the spices and ointments for his proper burial. Aren't those touching details? Can't you imagine how they felt? When someone you love dies, don't you want to DO something? Sometimes we women find release in preparing food. Jesus' friends went back to the place they were staying and prepared the spices and ointments. They had to do something, and this was something they could do.

And then they had to wait. That whole long Sabbath day, when they weren't supposed to do any work, when they weren't supposed to go more than a prescribed distance from their dwelling. They waited. How long that day must have seemed.

And the next morning "at early dawn" the scripture says, they came to the tomb. As soon as they could, they came to perform this final act of love-- this one remaining thing they could do for Jesus.

And then these men, these angels asked them their strange question. Why two angels? Wouldn't one be enough? Is it because Jewish law require two men to testify as witnesses? And then they give their wonderful news--"He isn't here. He is risen!"

The women had come to a cemetery looking for Jesus. They were looking in the wrong place. Death and the grave could not hold him. He was alive and walking in wide word.

The women had come to do something for Jesus. They found that he didn't need their ministrations. Instead he did something for them. He freed them from their grief and sin and imprisonment.

Do we make the same mistake. Do we assume we come here on Sunday morning to visit Jesus--to do something for him and then leave him here? Do we realize that he meets us out in the world whenever and wherever there is loneliness and need?

The angels say something else, "Remember how he told you that he must be handed over to sinners and be crucified and the third day rise again? Remember?"

Do you recall the story of the Unsinkable Molly Brown? She and her husband were common folk, but they had bought a mine. They struck it rich; they made millions. Some time later Molly decided she wasn't sure she loved her husband any more, and she made a trip to Europe to get away for awhile and think. Something happened in Europe that made her decide to go back to her husband. That's how she happened to be on the Titanic and to climb aboard one of the lifeboats and to become a heroine by brining hope to her comrades. "Don't worry," she told them, "I'm the unsinkable Molly Brown, we'll make it. What happened to make her decide to come home? Well, her husband had always said, "If you ever decide to leave me, take off that big gold ring I gave you and read what I've had engraved inside it." When Molly took off the ring, she read "Remember I love you and the name of the bank." Remember. Remember I love you, and remember I'll always take care of you. You can bank on it!

So the angels were saying, "Remember what Jesus said. Remember he loves you and he told you these things would happen. Remember he promised that he would rise again and that he'd always take care of you.

You can bank on it! So when the women remembered. They believed, and they joyfully told the other disciples the good news. But the disciples didn't believe them. This reminds me of an incident I read about.

One Sunday morning in a certain city church, the Gospel lesson had been read and the minister was about to begin the sermon. Suddenly a stranger seated in the balcony stood up and interrupted the service. "I have a word from the Lord!" he shouted. People looked around, and ushers ran up the balcony stairs. They managed to escort the man into the street before he could elaborate further on just what "word" he had been given. The man was in the wrong place. You don't expect a sermon from the balcony.

The first Christian sermon ever preached was treated a little more gently but with the same suspicion. When the women came back from the cemetery on Easter morning, they brought with them word of an empty tomb and astonishing news: "He is not here but has risen!" All Christian preaching begins here, and all Christian sermons are reverberations of this Easter news, first announced by the women to the other disciples. The response? The translations differ; you can take your pick. The words seemed to them like "an idle tale," "empty talk," "a silly story," "a foolish yarn."

Maybe they didn't expect the Gospel message to come from that source--from women. For them, looking for women to tell them a great truth would be looking in the wrong place. After all, in Jewish courts women were not seen as reliable witnesses. It took Jesus' actual presence among them to jog their memories, to help them see the truth. What does it take, what will it take for us?

Jesus still shows up in the places where we don't dare expect him. He is present in our moments of deepest grief. I stood in the cemetery by my friend John's casket last week with family and friends. Jesus was there. And John's wife Kay will tell you that Jesus was there throughout his difficult illness. He's present when we drive to work, and when we go to school, and when we drive nails on a Habitat for Humanity house. Perhaps most surprising of all is that beyond all expectation, the risen Jesus comes to live, if we let him, in our hearts. He wants to change us, as he changed the disciples.

Let me tell you the story of Jeremy. He was the last place you'd look for a word from God, but he was a little boy who remembered and who

understood.

Jeremy, was terminally ill. He was twelve years old and still in the second grade. He couldn't learn, he made unusual noises, he drooled. To most kids he was someone to make fun of; to his teacher, Jeremy was an exasperating, difficult student. Three months before he died, both students and teacher changed their opinion of him.

Before Easter the teacher, Miss Miller gave all of the students an empty plastic egg. They were to bring it back the next day with something in the egg that represented new life. The teacher planned to call Jeremy's parents that night and explain the assignment so that Jeremy would do what she asked, but some emergencies prevented her from calling.

When she opened the nineteen eggs with the children, the first one had a flower in it, and the teacher affirmed the fact that a flower represents new life. The second egg contained a butterfly, which everyone agreed signified new life. The third egg with a moss-covered rock demonstrated new life as well. To the chagrin of Miss Miller, the fourth egg was empty. She quickly guessed it was Jeremy's egg and laid it down without comment. Jeremy piped up, "Miss Miller, aren't you going to talk about my egg?" Flustered, she said, "Jeremy your egg is empty." He looked softly into her eyes and replied, "Yes, but Jesus' tomb was empty, too!"

Miss Miller later spent the recess period crying with a softened heart. Three months later when Jeremy died, his theology was represented by nineteen plastic eggs on his casket-all of which were empty.

It's the last place we'd look for the promised new life, but the great hope of Easter is found in an empty tomb.