

Hinde Street Methodist Church
17 April 2022
12 Noon Rev Peter Cornick

‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’

I prefer Worldle, to Wordle. Rather than choosing letters and hoping one of them might be orange or green, each day, the online game Worldle presents the shape of a country in the world. You have to assess all the information; is the border a straight line; is there an irregular and jagged coastline with islands; is it landlocked? I then take a trip in my imagination around the world, dismissing all the countries the shape can't be. Like Wordle, you only have six guesses; clues emerge as the guesses progress. I have a sense of joy or relief when I solve the Wordle or Worldle? People post how many guesses they took on social media; this week, I guessed Philippines in one – joy: Slovenia, a more nervous six – relief!

The evidence in front of the women, is puzzling. The heavy stone sealing the grave is rolled away; entering the tomb – no sign of a body. What is their best guess? What possibilities do they dismiss? Clues emerge. Two dazzling visions. ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’ Use the information you've been told. Jesus was crucified by sinners, yes, but he told you he would rise on the third day. Now do you see the world as it is: do you see the word?

Remembering, and without the convenience of social media, the women tell the eleven and then all the rest!

The resurrection account for Luke, is different from the familiar garden scene of John. For a start, did you notice, there is no resurrection appearance. No unexpected gardener calling Mary's name. Luke's Easter appearance is later, on the Emmaus road. There, the two disciples remember Jesus when he breaks bread. Here, the women remember Jesus' words: Jesus must be crucified by sinners, and on the third day, he would rise again. There is something about remembering Jesus' words, or his familiar actions, which makes Jesus become present amongst them.

Have you looked at the five letters in front of you, the map which is staring up at you, believing there is no possible word or country in that formation. Peter hears the testimony of the women, can't believe it, and runs to the wrong place.

Peter, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’ ... ‘He is not here, but has risen.’

He who is risen, is where there is life; where hope is offered. He who is living is where power, self-interest, cruelty, mockery, and abuse – all the suffering of Christ's passion, have been put to death.

‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’

In baptism, we discover a sign of life. The water, cleansing, healing, renewing. The image of rising from an old life to a new one. Rising with Christ – putting away all that leads to death and taking on all that makes for life.

Baptism, is the beginning of life with Christ. The start of the journey. Of learning more about Jesus. Easter has, in the church, been the traditional day for baptism. Why? Not just because of the symbolism of dying to the old and rising to the new. Easter presents the women at the tomb, who have of course been with Jesus throughout his life, but presents them at the beginning of a new journey. A journey of remembering all he had told them and keeping his living words in the present.

If the words from the cross that we heard on Friday ... of forgiveness to his murderers, of grace to the criminals beside him, of love to Mary, of being a God who knows utter abandonment so he can be with humans who feel utterly abandoned, of thirsting for righteousness, of completing – finishing the work of love, and when all things are gone, when there is nothing, hoping in God's embrace ... if those words, spoken in death are lifegiving, they need to be spoken about in the presence of the living. Christ's cross has meaning, not because it is about death, but because it is about living.

Baptism is about remembering Jesus' words and beginning a journey, like the women on the first Easter day, rising with him and living his life. He has risen: he is amongst the living.

'Why do you look for the living among the dead?'

The theologian Mark Oakley offers a poem by a 14th century Sufi poet called Hafiz.¹ In the poem, there is a more traditional and ancient game being played than the current online crazes: chess. Hafiz is charting the spiritual life. The one who understand, the saint, will understand that they are not the one in control – however much they desire to be so. It is God who makes the moves – guides the game. Oakley wants us to notice how the unexpected, the surprise of God, revealed in the poem and the empty tomb, removes our barriers and leaves us simply joyful – surrendering to God.

Here is part of the poem by Hafiz:

The saint knows
That the spiritual path
Is a sublime chess game with God.

And that the Beloved
Has just made such a Fantastic Move

That the saint is now continually
Tripping over joy
And bursting out in Laughter

¹ Oakley, Mark, *The Splash of Words*, Norwich, 2016

And saying, 'I Surrender!'²

These words, says Oakley, are 'as beautiful an image of grace as any I have come across.'³

The women who enter the tomb to perform a ritual of death – anointing the body of Jesus with herbs, are confronted with such a Fantastic Move of God, their whole world is subverted. And as they remember, as they are told not to look among the dead for the living, they are tripping over joy – bursting out in laughter. What can they do, but simply say to God, I surrender! They have experienced grace.

All this for you, before you could know anything of it.

In your baptism, the word of the apostle is fulfilled, 'We love, because God first loved us.'

The women have stood by Jesus even in his death. Have dutifully turned up to anoint his body. We have asked to be baptised, have dutifully done so. But whether it is the women, or you, me, writes Mark Oakley:

'it is not our faithfulness towards God that is the last word, but God's [faithfulness] towards us ... that is deathless.'⁴

It is not that we have guessed the right word or country. We have remembered the clues – what has gone before. This Fantastic Move, grace dawns on us; this is Easter: a Fantastic Move of God who brings us from death to life; tripping over joy.

'Why do you look for the living among the dead?'

² Oakley, *ibid*, p28

³ Oakley, *ibid*, p31

⁴ Oakley, *ibid*, p32