

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

2nd Sunday of Easter
Year C

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Luke 24:1-12

Title: “Leading Causes of Life: Choose Life!”

Have you ever noticed the way broadcast news stations change their titles for parts of their newscast? Take WNEM TV 5, for example. You know what they call their weather segment? “First Warn 5”. Why isn’t it “Fairweather 5” or “Sunnyside 5” or “Blueskies 5”? Maybe it’s because they know that fear sells. If they sell their weather department using fear, more people are likely to watch. What’s the appeal to listen to fair-weather broadcasts? Instead, “We’re here to warn you every day--multiple times a day-- about possible wicked weather. We will warn you first before anyone else about what is out there to threaten you.” Unfortunately, they often get it wrong like the Maundy Thursday prediction that didn’t come to be but the forecast did result in our cancellation of the service. As a side note, by the way, we are working on rescheduling the cantata for those of you who were looking forward to attending.

It’s not just that but shows like “Criminal Minds” and now a new spin off “Criminal Minds Beyond Borders” are huge successes. They are about pathological murderers and the people who persecute them. Then there is CSI, CSI Miami, and NCIS, NCIS Los Angeles and NCIS New Orleans also about murder and those that persecute them. Then there’s Dexter—about a serial killer or all the zombie hits that seem to attract so much attention. I know such dramas also depict hope but it seems very clear by that we live in a culture that seems to find fear and death as a form of entertainment.

Yet, we in the church are people of the Resurrection. We are people of a different story, one of Jesus Risen from the dead, not conquered by it. A young boy told me a few weeks ago, though, that he didn’t believe in the zombie kind of faith. I said I didn’t either. We are people of life, not death.

Appropriately in this Easter season, this next worship series will focus on “Leading Causes of Life”. It is based on a book written by two people of faith. One is a pastor of a small church in Montana and the other is a chaplain administrator of a hospital. They both realized that we talk a lot about “leading causes of death” in our culture but what we really need to focus on are the fundamentals of “abundant, thriving life.” We need to focus on Jesus’ promise: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). In their work with hospitals and health care around the world, they saw *some* persons crumble under difficult life situations, and others—in the same situations—who were living and thriving. What is the difference? What are the leading causes of life? From their book:

“Our imagination is so filled with resisting death that we hardly know what else to think about” [from the book, 26].

As they thought about this together, they identified five leading causes of life with which we will spend some time in the next 6 weeks: connection, coherence, agency, blessing and hope.

It is quite clear that what dominates the first part of the Easter story is the language of death, the mood of death. Jesus had been killed. Period. His body was taken down from the cross. Laid in a tomb. End of story. At least that’s what we see in all the Gospel accounts. Even those closest to Jesus thought it was over. Finished. Everybody knows the dead don’t rise.

Easter morning women go to the tomb. According to Luke’s Gospel, they had prepared burial spices and ointments in order to take care of the body appropriately. They made their way to this place of death to honor the one they loved by offering this final act of devotion of preparing his body for a proper burial. They were going to deal with death in the only way they could, like going to the funeral home to pay respects only this was more intimate.

As they make their way to the tomb to do the honorable thing for Jesus’ body, they were met by two messengers of God who immediately shifted their attention from death to life: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn’t here. He is risen. Don’t you remember what he told you?”

The Easter experience is the experience of life out of death. Life as God intends conquers death. Death does not have the last word in spite of what it appears.

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!

It boggles the imagination to consider that one man who started with 12 close disciples transformed the world, saved lives through century after century in nation after nation whose message to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself—including your enemies—captured the hearts of millions if he, in fact, did not rise to new life. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the congregation in Corinth, Greece:

¹⁴ ...if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have died^[e] in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15).

The Good News of God is written in a hymn:

Christ is alive and goes before us
To show and share what love can do

This is a day of new beginnings
Our God is making all things new.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy the Hebrew people are ordering their life together through the laws of God. In chapter 30 God tells the people:

¹⁹ ... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. **Choose life** so that you and your descendants may live,²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Choose life! God tells them. Choose life!

What I hear from scripture this morning is that we do have a choice about our fundamental orientation toward life. We can face the power of life by choosing to focus on the life God gives now and beyond death. We can choose to place our trust in God's power to give us abundant life in spite of the language of death all around us. We hear along with the women at the tomb: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" And we can choose to trust their witness of life in the face of death or we can choose to continue to believe that death has the last word in spite of the evidence to the contrary. Choose life! Choose life!

Eva Marie Cassidy probably isn't a name most of you know. She was an American vocalist and guitarist. She was not a well-known star on the music scene but she had a loyal following in her native Washington, D.C. In 1993 she had a malignant mole removed from her back. Three years later she noticed an ache in her hips. Thought it was the result of standing on a step ladder painting murals, but the pain persisted for a few weeks. The x-rays revealed that the melanoma had moved to her lungs and bones and the doctors told her she had three to five months to live. She decided to fight the cancer with aggressive treatment but it wasn't improving things. In the early fall of 1996 a benefit concert was held for her. It was there that she made her final public appearance and she closed the concert with this song: "What a Wonderful World". It was made famous by Louis Armstrong who himself experienced a different kind of cancer, the cancer of racism, and yet he saw life that was good and joyful and meaningful even in the midst of pain. So did Eva. The song was sung by two voices. Eva is the blond playing the guitar. When this was recorded she had already died, but listen as she chooses life even as her physical life is coming to a close...

(Play video clip.)

This morning you were given a colorful blossom. It is a symbol of life. You will receive one each Sunday you come during this series. Each week you will be asked a question and invited to write a response on the blossom. It can be a few words, a drawing, whatever you decide represents your response to the question. And then, you will be invited to tape your blossom to the trees posted on the back wall of the sanctuary. There is a tree in each back corner of the sanctuary. This morning I'll invite you to bring it with you if you come forward for communion and then make your way to one of the back corners to tape your blossom to the trees.

In the midst of all that we hear about death, decay and crumbling, where do you see life?
What will you choose?