

One thing I enjoy about moving into a new home is looking for the living, waiting to see what appears in the yard in the spring. Crocuses. Daffodils. Tulips. Lilies. Flowers of all kinds sprouting in the spring after a cold winter's freeze. Staci and I take note of what grows where, snapping a few photos, jotting down notes, so next fall we remember where the empty places were in order to plant new flower bulbs. And then the wait begins again, anticipating the new life that will emerge from the ground the following spring. When the snow clears and the sun warms the earth, we're once again looking for the living.

The new life emerging from the ground reflects the good news of the Easter story: that Jesus who had died emerged from the tomb with new life. It's an amazing story that's hard to explain, and yet each spring we witness new life coming from the ground. We may even begin to take the phenomenon for granted, but if we stop and think about it, it's amazing that a bulb that looks dead in

the frozen winter can push its way through the ground and create beauty from the earth. It's not only hard to explain how bulbs turn into flowers, it's hard to explain how Jesus could die and be resurrected.

When a Sunday school teacher tried to explain the Easter story to a group of children, she asked, "What's special about Easter?" She expected them to talk about hunting for Easter eggs or seeing the Easter bunny—these other things in nature that remind us of new life in spring.

But instead one little girl said, "Easter is the day that Jesus rose from the grave." The teacher was very pleased and complimented the girl on remembering what Easter meant. Then the girl continued, "But if he sees his shadow, he has to go back in for seven weeks."

Sometimes I think that happens to us—we confuse the Easter story with the groundhog story, not literally, of course, but in a figurative way. We gather here for worship and celebrate on Easter

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morning that Christ has risen, but then we return to the ordinary part of our lives on Monday and crawl back into our holes. The stresses of life fill our days, and we wonder if any new life exists at all. We hope that new life awaits us after death, but we struggle with living in various hole of turmoil in this life.

- Past memories of hurts and pains can haunt us for years, sending us back into our hole of fear.
- The pains of our aging bodies remind us that we have limited time left on this Earth, and our joy from Easter seems to hide into the ground.
- The joy of seeing our children or grandchildren hunt for Easter eggs begins to fade as they act like normal children again, bickering with siblings, asserting their independence, and not always doing what we ask. We may feel like crawling into a hole to avoid the frenzy of activity.

- When someone very close to us betrays us with unkind words or mean-spirited actions, we may climb into a hole to protect ourselves from the pain.

Life is filled with sorrows and pains, just as the women who visited the tomb experienced as they went to where Jesus had been entombed. Painful memories were fresh in their minds: Jesus' capture in the garden of Gethsemane, a peaceful place interrupted with violence; the disciples scattering as Jesus stood a mock trial for crimes he did not commit; the crowd turning on Jesus by selecting Barabbas rather than Jesus for release; the crowds yelling "crucify him" when Pilate asked what he should do with Jesus; Jesus walking along the city streets carrying his own cross and then dying a painful death on that same cross.

I can't even imagine the agony they felt as the women walked to the tomb carrying fragrant spices to embalm the body. When they found the stone to the entrance of the tomb rolled away but no corpse

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inside, they were startled when two men in brilliant clothing stood beside them. The frightened women then heard the two strangers explain, “Jesus isn’t here but has been raised. Remember what he told you, that he would be handed over to be killed but would rise on the third day? Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

There are times we still do that—we look for the living among the dead when we block our life today due to painful memories from the past.

- We try living among the dead when we strive to create relationships with those we love today on the broken relationships of the past.
- We sometimes still live among the dead when our fears keep us from living and trying something new *now*.

Sometimes I’ve known church folks who get confused and think they’re looking for the living among the dead. In some churches I pastored, they thought there was no life in the church, so they

looked to the past to search for the living among their ancient memories, getting caught up in the “good ole days” when sanctuaries were full, funds were plentiful, and everyone attended. When focused on the past, churches often miss the living that is going on right now among them—in the hugs and smiles that greet them every Sunday. In the cards sent for birthdays or for encouragement during illness. In the one or two new members or baptisms in a year. In the fellowship meals that bring them together to eat and laugh. In the music that comes from several voices in the choir. In the generous outreach and mission for the local community.

Even families get confused, and sometimes relationships may feel as though they are near death, as one youth expressed during a youth retreat:

The theme of the weekend was how teenagers get along with their parents. For an activity one night, the leaders brought in a big tub of clay

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and asked the youth to take a piece and shape it into a symbol that represented the relationship with their parents.

When the youth finished, one could see a wide variety of shapes created by the youth. One had made a heart shape to show that she loved her parents. Another had formed a flower out of the clay to symbolize how her relationship with her parents was growing. Another youth made what looked like a casket, saying her relationship with her parents was dead. And one had fashioned a garbage can and commented that his relationship with his parents was trash.

When they had finished the activity, the leaders asked everyone to put the clay back into the tub. When they did that, they noticed a label on the container that informed them that the clay was reusable after drying. So one

leader commented, “Isn’t that a great thing about clay? If we don’t like what’s been made, it can always be reworked and made better. Even if we think the situations that we’re in are trashed or dead, in God’s hands there’s always the possibility for something new and better.”<sup>1</sup>

And that is the Easter message, for when those women found the tomb empty, they discovered there was the possibility of something new and better. Rather than looking for the living among the dead, they discovered that new life had emerged in that place, that God had somehow molded the shape of the clay of death into the hope of new life. New life can occur not only after death, but even here and now. In the midst of what feels like days of death and struggle, look for the living, for Christ has risen and brings you hope of newness each day.

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<sup>1</sup> *Emphasis*, March-April 2001, p. 31.