doubt that Jesus died. He did not faint from the pain. He did not pass out from loss of blood. He was not in a state of suspended animation. Jesus was dead. No pulse. No breath. No brain activity. Nothing. Jesus died. He was so clearly dead that the soldiers who went to break his legs to hasten his death by suffocation, decided not to waste their time and energy on a dead man.

The people of Jesus’ day knew what “dead” looked like. Death was a daily occurrence. They were not fooled. Jesus’ death was no rumor. This was not fake news. Jesus was quite emphatically dead, wrapped in cloth, and laid in a tomb. They even rolled a massive stone over the entrance to the tomb, sealing it tight; even if there were a live, strong, man inside, that stone was going nowhere. But it’s a moot point; Jesus was dead.

At dawn on Easter morning, the women walked to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus’ body. They expected death, not life. But when they arrived, they found the stone rolled away and his body missing, which left them perplexed (vv. 1-4). Yet, their working hypothesis was still that Jesus was dead. It did not occur to them that he could be alive. The women were like the people around the world who assumed that Paul McCartney was dead when he appeared on the album cover of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) with his back to the camera. (All the other Beatles in the picture faced forward.) Paul wore a shoulder patch with the letters O.P.D., which means “Officially Pronounced Dead.”

Was Jesus O.P.D.? Everyone assumed that he was. It was a logical assumption. But at the empty tomb, two men in dazzling clothes appeared. The terrified women bowed their heads, while the men said, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen” (vv. 4-5). According to these men, Jesus was not dead, but alive! The women could not comprehend this news, so the men explained: “Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again?” (vv. 6-7). As the women recalled Jesus’ words, they began to put together how both death and resurrection were part of the plan that Jesus had laid out for them.

Jill Duffield, former editor of *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, wrote of this scene:

“Mary and Mary and Salome were in shock, and who could blame them? Don’t the dead stay dead? How many teenage boys in white robes have proclaimed the gospel to you at the graveside?

“People think in frames…To be accepted, the truth must fit people’s frames. If facts do not fit the frame, the frame stays and facts bounce off” (George Lakoff quoted in David John Seel Jr.’s book, *The New Copernicans*). If you are coming to anoint a dead body, news of a living person does not fit the frame. No wonder they were distressed, stupefied, and agitated. Who could believe such a thing to be possible?

“And yet we know the truth did not fit their frame – or anyone else’s for that matter. Grave secrets have a way of coming back to life and when they do, those who discover them often have to reframe their whole entire lives because all they thought was true, well, wasn’t. That’s what Easter does. It reframes absolutely everything when the grave secret comes out.”

So, the women went and told his followers that Jesus was alive. What is significant here is that that Luke takes the time to identify the women by name: “it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles” (vv. 8-10). This is eyewitness testimony, made by women who are well-known and trustworthy in the community of Jesus’ followers.  But the women did not convince their friends; their words seemed to the apostles to be “an idle tale and they did not believe them” (v. 11). Only Peter ran to the tomb to see for himself, and then he went home, “amazed” (v. 12) that Jesus’ body no longer lay in the tomb.

Easter confronts us with the question, “Is Jesus dead?” Some people say yes, because no one spotted Jesus near the tomb. Surely, someone would notice an animated Jesus in the area. But in Luke’s account, no one saw him. Why? Because Jesus was dead! But we cannot ignore the testimony of the women and the two men at the tomb. These eyewitnesses make a compelling case for the resurrection of Jesus. Their words and actions teach us that new life is not limited to Easter morning; it continues in our words and actions today.

For starters, *the resurrection is experienced whenever we focus on life instead of death*. The two mysterious men ask the women a simple but important question, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (v. 5). So often we look for death instead of life, as was abundantly clear when the “Paul is dead” rumor swept around the world. People are naturally drawn to stories of bloodshed and disaster and death, as is captured in the well-known maxim of news programming, “If it bleeds, it leads.” But one of the signs of resurrection-living is a focus on life, which the women show when they take the message of the empty tomb to the disciples.

The children’s television star Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, and his Christian faith infused all his lessons. Rogers kept his focus on the living, not on the dead, especially in situations of tragedy and suffering. One insight came from Rogers’ own childhood when he saw scary things on the news. His mother always said to him, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” For the rest of his life, Rogers said, “especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers — so many caring people in this world.” As a believer in the resurrection, Rogers focused on life instead of death.

We see resurrection *when we remember the full story of Jesus,* from his ministry in Galilee to his crucifixion and resurrection. Even though some of the story is painful, it holds together, and it gives us a pattern for understanding our own experiences of death and new life, as individuals and as a community.

Bart Millard is the lead singer of the Christian music group MercyMe. After his father died, he wrote a song called “I Can Only Imagine,” which explores what life in heaven might be like. What the song does not reveal is what a jerk Bart’s father was. For years, Arthur Millard beat his son, sometimes three or four times a week. Bart grew to hate his father, and the two parted ways. When Arthur converted to Christianity and later developed terminal cancer, Bart decided to give his father a second chance at a relationship.

“My dad was a monster, and I saw God transform him,” said Bart. Their story was painful, and it took a terminal illness to bring the two together. But the end of the story is resurrection, including the reconciliation of a father and a son, and the creation of a Christian song that gives hope and inspiration to millions of people.

As children of the Living God, we must stop looking for death when God gives life. As disciples of the Risen Christ, we must follow Jesus as we seek to understand our own experiences of death and new life. We believe that Jesus is alive and seated at the right hand of the throne of God. We also believe that Jesus is not dead, because he is alive in us, now and always.

Prayer: Lord of Life and Power, through the mighty resurrection of your Son, You have overcome death, and opened the gate of everlasting life. Grant that we, being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ, may reign with him in glory, who with you and the Holy Spirit is alive, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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**Jesus Is Dead?**

Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021 Luke 24:1-12

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

When a major American newspaper prematurely printed a lengthy obituary for him, Mark Twain famously quipped, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” Erroneous reports of people’s deaths pop up with exasperating regularity. Some famous folks who saw their own death notices include: Pope John Paul II, P.T. Barnum, Barbara Bush, George H. W. Bush, Fidel Castro, Jackie Chan, Chevy Chase, Hillary Clinton, Celine Dion, Kirk Douglas, Queen Elizabeth II, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Hugh Hefner, Bob Hope, Michael Jordan, Nelson Mandela, Joe Montana, Al Pacino, Sylvester Stallone, and Betty White.

The same thing happened to Paul McCartney in 1969. A report that “Paul is dead” flew around the world. According to the report, McCartney died in a car accident after a fight with Beatles band mates in 1966. There was even a rumor that Britain’s intelligence service (MI5) replaced McCartney with a look-alike, an orphan from Edinburgh, fearing riots by grieving Beatles fans.

Beatles fans bought into the rumors. Seeking proof of McCartney’s death, they played a song from *The* *White Album* backwards, claiming to hear the phrase “Turn me on, dead man.” Others who listened to the song “Strawberry Fields Forever” thought they heard John Lennon say, “I buried Paul.” As further “proof,” conspiracy theorists point to the cover of the *Abbey Road* album which shows the four Beatles crossing the street in a funereal-like procession. John Lennon, dressed in white, is the heavenly figure. Ringo Starr, in black, is the undertaker. George Harrison, in denim, is the gravedigger. And McCartney, barefoot and out of step with the others, is the corpse. A Volkswagen in the background has the license plate “28IF,” the age that McCartney would have been in 1969, *if* he had survived.

The Beatles’ press office quickly issued statements denying the rumors, saying that it was “a load of old rubbish.” Paul was still very much alive. He was not killed in a car accident in 1966. The Beatles did not replace Pau with a look-alike. Britain’s security service did not orchestrate a coverup. Years later, McCartney had some fun with the rumors by recording a live album called *Paul Is Live*.

On Friday of Holy Week, the acquaintances of Jesus, including the women who followed him from Galilee, stood at a safe distance from the cross and watched Jesus die (Luke 23:44-49). Then a righteous man named Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb (23:50-56). There can be no