



## **Not Among the Dead**

**Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12**

**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (April 17, 2022)**

Easter is the central and most important Feast for the Christian life. It is not simply the triumph of life over death. Nature does that every Spring. What Christians around the world celebrate is God's "Yes" to a life of justice and love to the "No" of violence and hate. Easter is the celebration of God's love for us, lost, alienated, confused, and scared. It's the happy ending to a life lived in total dedication to the mission of God to bring light and grace to a world in darkness and severely in need of grace.

It's also the happy ending to a very difficult week in which Jesus, consciously and by choice, marches triumphantly into Jerusalem, the very place he knows the Jewish leadership is on the look out to arrest and do away with him. Jesus knows the authorities are scheming his demise, and yet for love of humanity and faithfulness to the Father, he walks straight into the lion's den. What prophet, after all, will die outside of Jerusalem? (see Luke 13:31)<sup>1</sup>

Soon after he celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples and with them he goes to the garden of Gethsemane for prayer, a mob of people lead by Judas, a former disciple turned traitor, arrests him and brings him before the High Priest, then Pilate, then Herod, and then Pilate again. The tragedy progresses with mocking, beating, spitting, flogging, torture with a crown of thorns, and finally with the crucifixion of the Son of God as a bandit and an enemy of the Empire.

And then...at dawn, two shocking and unexpected discoveries: the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away and Jesus isn't in the tomb where they laid him. The women are "perplexed" to say the least. But that perplexity is short lived. It gets even more confusing.

"He is risen. Don't look for him among the dead!" two men in dazzling, brilliant clothes announce to the women. The women are terrified to the point of fainting. That news can be so disorienting. How can it be? What does it mean? Where is the Lord? Certainly not here, not in the cemetery, not among the dead. But how can they be expected to move from grief to celebration, from the heartbreaking witnessing of Jesus' excruciating death to the experience of new life. What's happened to Jesus? What's happening to them? What are they to do with the anointing oils they have brought for the burial ritual? Could someone rise to get them unstuck? What are they to do now? Tell the story to whom, the other disciples? And will they believe them if they themselves have a hard time wrapping their mind around it? How can you tell others of the resurrection from the dead?

Those who have recently experienced the death of a loved one know firsthand the roller coaster of feelings associated with loss. They know how drained it feels and how hard it is to face a new day. They know how different the daily routine feels. The whole world is upside down. One

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<sup>1</sup> [No Prophet Can Die Outside Jerusalem! | Mike Lawrence Books](#)

needs the comfort of routine, of predictable steps during the days and months ahead. But that is totally denied now, abruptly suspended. Nothing is familiar anymore. Nothing is normal.

But the confusing cycles of grief are the natural way of the body to slow down, to take pause and distance oneself to take stock and make sense of what just happened. The cycles of grief see one moving from shock to numbness to denial and back to numbness and confusion and anger at themselves, at the dead person, and perhaps even at God. Nothing feels right anymore. Nothing is the same. There is no normal anymore.

The whole world is just barely coming out of the pandemic (and maybe starting a third round). We have figured out by now that there is no going back to a “normal” we were familiar with. And those for whom “that” normal was not good to them are happy it is gone. Maybe a “new” normal needs to be more inclusive of all, more just and equitable. Maybe the new normal needs to be life-giving to all; it needs to safeguard everyone’s humanity, everyone’s dignity, everyone’s desire and necessity to thrive.

Those who know loss and tragedy because of war and violence, also know confusion and anger. They know disruption of daily life. They know the bitterness and sting of death.

The celebration of Easter breaks into the spiral of grief, but the stages of anger, denial, and bargaining continue to unfold. There are some in our midst who are grappling with the reality of death and loss. There are some for whom the crucifixion is still a fresh reality and the stench of death all too close. For them Easter is a promise they are not ready to celebrate just yet. We respect that. We need to honor and support those who still see Christ being crucified today on account of greed and lust for power. The body of Christ found in the streets of cities and villages in Ukraine,<sup>2</sup> in South Sudan,<sup>3</sup> or in Yemen<sup>4</sup> still needs our tears and our attention.

When we look at death in the face, when we witness to cruelty and violence, when evil seems to spread easily and unchallenged, one wonders what the world has come to.

And yet, we do not need to hold on to the anointing vessels: God has vindicated Jesus and affirmed his prophetic message of just love, reconciliation, and nonviolence. He’s vindicated, he really is who people doubted he was.

But the women (and us) need to be reminded: Jesus spoke about this, about how “the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” (Luke 23:7)

There is no way one may experience new life without passing through the crucible of death. There is no way a seed will sprout unless it falls to the ground and dies (John 12:24). If it is not sown, it’s useless and will die anyway (1 Corinthians 15:36). There can be no joy of Easter unless there is the tragedy of Good Friday.

How can I go on without the hope of Easter resurrection? What sense has living if I do not know how to die?

There are tears of joy on Easter, no doubt. And tears of some sorrow as well, thinking of those we’ve loved and lost who used to join us Easter Sunday but are no more. Yes, there are forces still at work battling against life.

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<sup>2</sup> [It's not the end': The children who survived Bucha's horror \(chron.com\)](https://www.chron.com)

<sup>3</sup> [Abuses by South Sudan govt amounts to 'war crimes': UN | News | Al Jazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/04/abuses-by-south-sudan-govt-amounts-to-war-crimes)

<sup>4</sup> [War in Yemen | Global Conflict Tracker \(cfr.org\)](https://www.cfr.org/war-in-yemen)

But the stone has been removed and the tomb is empty. I might be just as perplexed as the women were, and yet I also know, I can't hold on to the anointing vessels; I can't hold on to what reminds me of tragedy, of loss, of sorrow, and of an unreconciled reality. Jesus is risen. I know his way brings truth and life. Of whom shall I fear, then? My first step towards him is the beginning of my new life.

Resurrection is not the end of a tragic week but the beginning of a new day. May we be children of the Light. Amen.