

For Michael O'Neill of Middlesbrough, England, death was just a vacation. No, I'm not talking about some elaborate near-death experience here, but a real life variation on *Death Takes a Holiday*. Several years ago a man named Michael decided to take a last-minute trip to Australia to visit a friend and made his plans without telling anyone. His neighbors, who had seen neither hide nor hair of him for days, grew worried and called the police, who broke down the door of his flat only to find that he had disappeared, leaving behind no evidence of what had happened to him.

Honest mistake, right? But it gets weirder. A few weeks later, a death notice appeared in the local paper for a Michael O'Neill, another resident of Middlesbrough, who was about the same age as the intrepid traveler and who had brothers named Kevin and Terry. In a bizarre coincidence, the vacationing Michael's brothers were also named Kevin and Terry.

Friends and neighbors of the very-much- alive O'Neill figured that their worst fears had been realized. That is, until one of them received a postcard from him, confirming that, while he was indeed Down Under, it wasn't in the way they had thought. Michael arrived home from his trip, to find his front door smashed in, police watching the flat, and his neighbors, once again seeing him on the street, believing in ghosts.

"Everywhere I went, people I knew were grabbing hold of my hands, saying, I thought you were dead!" O'Neill told *The Daily Telegraph*. "They couldn't believe it was me and that I was still alive. At first I was a nervous wreck because everywhere I went people kept grabbing me!"

Sorry, Mike, but that's just the natural reaction when someone who's "dead" returns from Down Under! Jesus himself experienced a similar reception when he, too, returned from the down under of the grave — except that his friends and neighbors had seen him die and it was no vacation. The events of that Friday left

Jesus' disciples, his closest friends, and his casual acquaintances no doubt shocked at the brutal, painful and shameful way that Jesus had died on a Roman cross. The only saving grace of the whole experience was that at least his body was allowed to be laid in a tomb by his friends instead of left hanging for days to rot in public humiliation, as was standard Roman practice.

But it wasn't as if Jesus hadn't told them where he was going. Unlike Michael O'Neill, Jesus was very clear with his friends that he would be taking a trip down a road that would lead him toward the cross and the grave. In fact, Jesus had given them his fateful itinerary three times but "they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

They were surprised, then, to find the tomb door open, the flat stone of his resting place empty, and no indication of Jesus' whereabouts on Sunday morning. Matthew, Chapter twenty seven verse 62 even says that the cops had been watching the place but to no avail. Instead of being missing and presumed dead, Jesus was dead and presumed missing. No one needed an obituary to determine which Jesus bar Joseph of Nazareth had died, only where his body had been taken.

It was the angelic messengers who provided a postcard description of his whereabouts. Reports of his death had been greatly exaggerated, they said. "He is not here, but has risen," they explained, and then reminded the women again of his travel plans. Two disciples traveling on the road to Emmaus got the same reminder, only to find out that it was the risen Jesus himself who was delivering it.

Now gathered together in Jerusalem, with the anxiety, grief and wonder of the last three days on their minds, all the disciples and friends of Jesus tried to sort out the evidence. But then, suddenly, there he was among them saying, "Peace be with you." Like the perplexed and astounded neighbors of O'Neil in Middlesbrough, the disciples thought they were seeing a "ghost." Death is a trip,

which no one is supposed to return from, so it's little wonder that the disciples were "frightened" and that even "in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering." Yet, unlike O'Neil, Jesus had no problem with people grabbing on to him to see if he was real. "Touch me and see," he says to his incredulous friends, "for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Luke makes it clear that this was no projection of imagination, or collective fantasy. The risen Jesus was touchable, and even hungry, asking his friends for a little fish on the barby.

These physical details about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances are offered by Luke as a form of proof; cataloging and foreshadowing the essential thrust of the message about him, that his disciples would carry into the world. It's instructive for us to remember that the "good news" the disciples preached was not bound up in the teachings of Jesus, as much as it was focused on the pivotal events of his death and resurrection. The risen Jesus, wiping the crumbs of fish off the table, reminded them that it was not a philosophy they were dealing with, but a real and resurrected person in whose name "repentance and forgiveness" would be proclaimed "to all nations beginning from Jerusalem."

Later, in the book of Acts, Luke tells us that the disciples did not go around the Roman world setting up Jesus memorial societies, or simply repeating his parables. Instead, they insisted that Jesus was alive, that his death and resurrection had ushered in a new age in which God had set a fallen world to rights, and that they had been witnesses to the fact.

They also understood that, after his ascension, they were to continue to embody his scarred hands and feet, feeding a world hungry for the hope of salvation, wholeness and promise of new life made possible by his sacrificial death and bodily resurrection. They hadn't seen a ghost, or a resuscitated corpse (two of the most accepted ideas of life after death at the time). They had witnessed

something utterly new, surprising, and overwhelmingly joyful. No matter how bizarre their story seemed to be, and no matter how much the prevailing powers tried to crush their movement, they continued to be “witnesses” to the reality of resurrection. We must not lose the connection here, that the root of the Greek word for “witness” is the same as the root for “martyr.”

There in Jerusalem, sometime on that amazing Sunday, Jesus mapped out for his disciples just how the journey had been leading God’s people to this precise point in history. He led them on a biblical lecture through the liberating stories of the exodus, on to the warnings and exhortations of the prophets, and through the pain and hope of the psalms to his own journey to the cross. His death had been an essential part of the journey and was now to be seen as a holiday, or rather holy day, instead of a day of mourning. Jesus had journeyed downward from heavenly exaltation into humanity, had taken an unbelievable trip to the depths of pain and death, and had returned in amazing triumph. Because of him, death is no longer our final destination!

Jesus was the original dead man Down Under, but the passage of time since that Sunday can distance us from the feeling of surprise. Easter comes every year, but it usually finds Christ’s followers arguing and debating theological points, and social issues among themselves, while the rest of the world yawns in indifference. Perhaps that’s because Pastor’s don’t always preach and engage the sheer, audacious surprise of the resurrection. We can become so enamored with our worship planning and our engagement with members and friends of our churches, that we neglect the incredible claims of the gospel. We act as though Jesus has gone on some kind of long vacation, and while we do things in his name, we don’t always expect things to change as a result.

Coming back to these familiar stories reminds us, though, that the risen Christ is among us in the Spirit and will return to us in his resurrection body to

finish the work he began. In 1 John 3, our second lesson read this morning, the author offers a word of encouragement and motivation for those for whom the resurrection is a distant memory, or a theological conundrum. “Beloved,” he writes, “we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he [Jesus] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have their hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.”

The friends of Jesus came “looking for the living among the dead” that Easter Sunday. The promise of resurrection means that we’re always looking for the dead to come to the land of the living! Which begs the question, who are the people in our community who need new life? Who’s on a spiritual vacation from which they can’t seem to return? How will those of us who are friends and members of First Lutheran welcome them home?

I would like to close with a quote from Culpepper in Luke from the New Interpreters Bible. “Where the Lord's physical hands and feet are no longer present, the ministry of the hands of countless saints in simple and sincere ministries continues to bear witness to the Lord's living presence. Although he may not appear in our midst to eat broiled fish, his presence is tangible in soup kitchens, around the kitchen table, and around the altar table. We see him "in the breaking of bread."

As in the first century so now the most convincing proof of the resurrection is the daily testimony of the faithful that the Christ still lives and the work of his kingdom continues. For this reason, the movement from proofs to commissioning is natural.... The believer who affirms that the Lord is risen, therefore, should consider next what it is that the Lord has sent him, or her to do. The uniqueness of the Easter message is that it invariably changes the lives of those who find themselves touched by it. Amen.