

An unimaginable outcome (Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12)

The disciples can barely believe that Jesus is dead, let alone that he has been raised to life once more.

by [Sean Gladding](#)

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Immediately following seminary, I had the rare privilege of co-pastoring a church with my best friend. Mercy Street in Houston is a community of people in recovery from one kind of addiction or another, together with many trying to find freedom from the substances and behaviors that continue to hold them in thrall. The community also includes its fair share of people who are not addicts but who are drawn to the authentic vulnerability that is part of the church's DNA.

In my seven years with that wonderful, messy community, of all the funerals at which I presided, only one was of a member who had died following a long life. Every other time I stood before a grieving group of people, it was because someone they loved had been taken from them far too soon. Taken by an overdose or a car wreck while under the influence. By the damage alcohol and drugs wreak on a body, by suicide, homicide. Each loss was keenly felt, a life ended with much of its promise unrealized.

Even though anyone who has ever loved someone suffering from an addiction knows death is a possible outcome for that pernicious disease, for most of the people I sat

with following their loss, that person's death still came as a shock. So when it came to the pastoral conversation about what they wanted the funeral to include, as often as not, I was met with blank stares, as if choosing just the right hymn or passage of scripture wasn't worth any of the limited mental and emotional effort they had available to them. While they may have heard the saying "there are three places an active alcoholic can go: jail, institutions, or death" in a 12-step meeting they attended with their loved one, the first two places were easier to imagine than the third.

So I find myself feeling a degree of sympathy for the disciples who locked themselves away following Jesus' death. I imagine that they sat around with similar expressions to the ones I recall from sitting with the recently bereaved. Even though Luke begins the narrative of Jesus' journey to the cross back in chapter 9, where he tells his disciples plainly that he will suffer, be killed, and be raised, by the time we get to chapter 24, I'm not surprised by the reaction of the male disciples to the women's report. I can believe that to them, hearing of an angel at the tomb declaring, "He is not here, but has risen," sounds like an "idle tale."

Perhaps those gathered do reject the testimony of Mary and the others simply because they are women, as many have suggested. But I wonder if it's equally likely that they reject the news the women bring because they can barely believe that Jesus is dead, let alone that he has been raised to life once more. Having witnessed the crushing guilt that members of our community so often felt in the immediate aftermath of their loved one's tragic death, I can only imagine the depths of the guilt the eleven felt after abandoning Jesus to his gruesome fate.

Many of the funerals at which I presided were of people who were not members of our community but who had some kind of connection to Mercy Street through the rooms where people sought "a power greater than ourselves." It was sheer gift to stand with grieving people and carry the same message as the faithful women carried that day. The message that there is indeed a power greater than ourselves—a power greater, even, than death—and that we are invited to believe Isaiah's witness that one day, in the new creation, "no more shall the sound of weeping be heard, or the cry of distress."