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Redemption Here

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

One warm spring day in 1986, a woman in Hot Springs, Arkansas named Ruth Coker Burks went to the hospital to visit her friend who was undergoing cancer treatment. While she was there Ruth noticed a door at the end of the hall with a red tarp over it, covering the entry into a room that the nurses were all thoroughly avoiding. As curiosity soon got the better of Ruth she made her way down the hall. Stepping over old trays full of styrofoam cups and uneaten food. Pushing aside the large red tarp, and peering through the doorway Ruth saw what appeared to be a shadow of a man. His translucently pale skin camouflaged amidst the white bedding, his bony structure barely visible under the crumpled sheets. Not knowing what else to do Ruth asked the man if there was anything she could get for him. To which he replied “I want my mama.” Ecstatic, Ruth thought, “well I can do that.” But, when Ruth called his mother, she claimed her son had been dead for years, and refused to come to be present with him during his last hours. So Ruth was. And, when the man, Jimmy, saw Ruth return to the room he exclaimed, “oh mama I knew you would come.” To which Ruth replied “I’m here honey, I’m here, I’m not going to leave you.”

Ruth, sat with Jimmy for the next 11 hours, until he died around midnight. As I many of you may remember during this time, 1986, AIDS was still a very new and unknown disease. It didn’t even register for Ruth that that might be what Jimmy was dying from. And, with all the stigma, lack of knowledge, or support, so many forgotten and cast out individuals we’re dying at staggering rates, many uncared for and alone. A week after Jimmy died Ruth got a call from the hospital saying “another one of yours is dying,” asking if she could come and take care of him. With no one willing to assist or be present for these men, Ruth, a young single mother in the rural South, quickly became their guardian angel. She learned how to draw blood so that people could get tested with anonymity. She brought meals to those who could no longer feed themselves. She sat with people as they died. And, when no one came to collect the bodies, she buried them in her family's graveyard.

Today in our passage from Luke we hear Jesus say, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." And, I’m guessing right about now you might be thinking, hey I thought we were preparing for Christmas, not girding our loins for the end of the world?! I thought we were supposed to be trimming our trees, not doomsday prepping. I thought we were supposed to be making room in our hearts and homes from the coming Christ, not

fearing for our judgement day! And, while I hear you, and even more so, I agree with you. At the same time I find a significant beauty and gift in this passage. As an apocalyptic text (that being the literary style), it may feel as if Jesus is predicting the end of the world, or maybe even more so invoking fear in our hearts for what is to come. But, this is not, I believe, what Jesus is doing at all. Instead what he is trying to do, I would argue, is to get our attention. Like a good alarm clock, to wake us up so that we might not only see the reality that is all around us, but respond, without being tempted to hit the snooze button over and over (as I love to do every morning).

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap."

When asked why she did all this, cared for strangers who were dying from an unknown, dangerous, and possibly contagious disease, Ruth said, "Because, it's what the Bible tells us to do." As she went on to explain what her ministry meant to her, stating, "I always felt like I was carrying them across the river of death to God and their friends that loved them. Where there was no judgement and they were just loved." Adding, "I learned more from these men about living than I ever did about dying." We can be scared for all that is happening around us, it is only natural, even right, because we were wired that way. And, yet, here Ruth reminds us, and Jesus encourages us what it means to live in this world as Christians, which is to respond with love to whatever it is that may cause us to tremble. A love so powerful and so abundant that it overshadows the pain and even the death, so that all that is left is life, to the fullest. As we prepare our hearts, minds and souls for the baby Jesus and coming Christ, let us remember that we are invited to do more than preparing for the coming Kingdom we are invited to live into it, here and now. The Christ child may be coming at Christmas, but the body of Christ is already here and now! It's you and me! So, my friends, let us stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is here!