

## *EMPTY*

Luke 23.46; Mark 15.37-41

Good Friday, 14 April 2017

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Bible scholars tell us that the one of the earliest liturgical poems - or hymns - in the community of Jesus can be found in a letter to the community in the ancient city of Philippi:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
and being born in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on a cross.*

Think about this: Central to our ancestors' faith and to their experience of worship was a testimony about emptiness.

This Holy Week and this Good Friday is not a metaphor for Pastor Harriet. Her mom died on Tuesday morning. And when we talked later that day, she said something that I think will stick with me for a long time. When I asked how she was doing, she said: "You know, I am so busy with all the tasks I have to do that I haven't been able to *feel my mother's absence yet.*"

She was so distracted by all the stuff that needed to get done that she couldn't experience the loss that would help her do the grieving she knew she needed to do. Her life was so full of things at the moment, she could not access the emptiness that is this new reality of her life.

And that made me wonder if Good Friday can be hard for us because we are so busy being distracted by the God business – by all the things we know we need to do in the world – that we haven't been able to feel the absence of God. Or to admit to the emptiness our ancestors knew they needed to make sense of their lives.

I am coming up on a year now since that ill-fated sabbatical of mine. After 35 years of ministry, I was finally looking forward to a good chunk of time to be away from work and to finish my dissertation. Then the cancer diagnosis came. Then the surgery. Then pneumonia. And then that long recovery process.

When Patrick would ask how I was feeling, I would say “lost.” By which what I really meant was “empty.” I was angry at the universe for robbing me of that time. I was angry at my body for betraying me. I felt like a reverse magnetic field – all the things I thought would be attracted into this vacuum of no work were instead repelled. And all the things I otherwise love just bounced off me. Rather than rest and renewal, I was exhausted by the experience of emptiness.

I confess. I tried to put a good face on it when I got home. I didn't want you to be disappointed and I didn't want me to be disappointed. But the truth is, if it wasn't exactly hell, it was definitely purgatory – that place of limbo that can be a torture all its own.

Now I'm not telling you this not to make you feel sorry for me but to invite you to be honest about your own experiences of emptiness.

Maybe it's the loss of a love that had been at the center of your life.

Maybe it's waking up some morning and discovering that a job or a career you thought you loved doesn't fill you up anymore. It just drains you.

Maybe it's an understanding of God or a spiritual path that gave your life meaning but it doesn't work anymore.

Maybe it's listening to the news and not having the energy to even care anymore.

Maybe it's crying out to God and only hearing silence coming back at you.

If you know anything about what it feels like to be empty, you know something about Good Friday.

And as Harriet and our spiritual ancestors will tell you, feeling the absence – allowing ourselves to feel that emptiness – is necessary for you to do the grieving you need to do, to name the reality you need to claim, to experience the loss that is the reality of life.

I remember Pastor Ned saying at a Sunrise service a couple years ago: The first sign of the resurrection was not angels or hearing Jesus call your name. It was the *empty* tomb. It was the moment those early disciples realized that everything was lost. There was nothing left. Emptiness was the space out of which resurrection could happen.

Now, I know that some of us are “the-glass-is-half-empty” kind of people. Some of us are “the-glass-is-half-full” kind of people. Some of us are really good at delving into the depths of emptiness and some of us have little patience for that.

But whoever you are, on this Good Friday, can we all just admit that whatever glass we are holding has space in it for more. And I can assure you that just allowing ourselves to be distracted by all the things we think we need to do, won't fill it up.

As Harriet, I think, would tell us and as our ancestors knew,  
for the depth of our own spiritual lives,  
for the healing of our souls,  
for the possibility of new life to come,  
leave room for emptiness.

Have the same mind in you that was also in Jesus who knew the grace of  
feeling empty.