

An Empty Tomb
Luke 24.1-12
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Luke 24.1-5 (*Inclusive Bible*)

On the first day of the week, at the first sign of dawn, the women came to the tomb bringing the spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled back from the tomb; but when they entered the tomb, they didn't find the body of Jesus. While they were still at a loss over what to think of this, two figures in dazzling garments stood beside them. Terrified, the women bowed to the ground. The two said to them, "Why do you search for the Living One among the dead? Jesus is not here; Christ has risen."

Luke 24.6-12 (NRSV)

Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

AN EMPTY TOMB

I come to you this morning from an empty sanctuary to talk about Easter's empty tomb. That seems fitting in a weird sort of way.

I'm tempted to say that this room feels a little bit like an empty tomb – except that I can't be here without remembering all the life that has gone on in this space.

The Do-It-Yourself Christmas pageants with some of you dressed as characters in the story. And others of you – who *are* characters in your own right - dressed as extraordinary additions to the story. I will never forget the Christmas unicorn or the Christmas sloth. You know who you are.

There are those concerts that filled this space with glorious music – the echoes of which you heard this morning.

The weddings that have filled this place with love. And the memorials that still hold us in the spirit of loss and in the celebration of life.

The prayers that connect us. And the sermons that fed us, even if sometimes they were hard to swallow and left us with some godly indigestion for our own good.

The list is long and I hope, right now, you are making your own.

My friend Brooke reminded me of an Easter sermon I preached several years ago, in which I said the "tomb was not *empty*; it was *opened*." After all, the story says the stone was rolled away. That's what you saw in the Godly Play story with Patrick this morning. It was opened! And inside there were still the

grave linens and eventually those figures “in dazzling clothes standing beside them” with this question: “Why are you looking for the Living One among the dead?”

The tomb was hardly empty. It was an opening to mystery and the promise of a new kind of life and to a terrifying kind of hope because it was the kind of hope that could change everything.

You have seen David Horton’s photo this week of this room glowing with afternoon sunlight. He captioned it: “For now, only Divine Radiance fills the pews ... just for now.”

Standing here this morning, I will not retract what I said all those years ago. But I will say – for all its fullness – *this* room does feel empty.

It is empty without you.

That physical absence makes every day feel a little bit empty. And more so, standing in *this room*. If anything, this emptiness opens that awareness that what is most present is the feeling of your absence – something that most of our loss will teach us over time.

Even if it is not exactly true in a technological sense or an emotional sense or a spiritual sense, the emptiness of this place is true in a physical sense. And I think, this morning, I can understand a little better why the early church insisted on the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus. Bodies matter. Human touch matters. Our physical presence with one another matters.

I was in a Zoom clergy gathering last week to talk about mental health in these days. I said that I was trained to think of ministry as “non-anxious presence.” But these days, I feel like an “anxious non-presence.” I struggle with what it means to live my calling authentically when I can’t be in the same room with you.

It feels empty. And I don’t think there is any getting around that the first experience of Easter for Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James was the shock of discovering that the open tomb produced this deep sense of emptiness.

They were there at the crack of dawn to anoint his body – his physical body. And now even that was gone. Imagine the emptiness of that moment. Maybe you don’t have to imagine. You know.

Think about those who have lost loved ones to this virus who could not be there physically to say goodbye.

And with all this emptiness the women were experiencing and we may be experiencing, this is my Easter question:

What kind of new life can come out of emptiness?

Will staying at home teach us something new about ourselves and what it means to be connected to the world?

Will our empty streets teach us something new about our impact on the environment?

Will our empty offices and restaurants and factories and stores teach us something about economics?

I would remind you that Luke has a “thing” about emptiness. Remember that great Magnificat in Luke 1? Mary sings:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my savior ...
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly; [doesn't sound like “trickle-down” to me]
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

I hope to God that, as a people, we will not squander this time by not taking seriously this opportunity to see what our economic system is doing to people and to imagine a new and more just way to be.

Will the emptiness of this sanctuary teach us something new about what it means for us to be together?

I stand in this empty room this morning and I can't help but remember. So, maybe it's not a surprise that, in the empty tomb, those figures in dazzling clothes, standing *beside* them – not in front of them, not behind them, but right next to them - say, “remember what Jesus said about dying and rising?”

“Then, they remembered his words,” the story says, “and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.” And when the whole group of women – more than 3 because there were “other women with them” – when they told the men their story, the men thought their words were an “idle tale,” or in the Greek and Latin, they were “*empty words*.”

There *are* empty words. And we have heard a lot of them these days. Part of what makes them empty is that there is no action to back them up. Or sometimes, words are empty because they have no reality behind them.

Tragically, these are the words we are hearing from the President right now and from preachers who say that loving God and being loyal to God means that people should defy the orders to stay at home and to go to church. These are empty words because Jesus made it very clear that “loving God” *means* “loving your neighbor.”

There *are* empty words. But the words of these women on that Easter morning were not. Out of that opened and empty tomb, they were in contact with a new kind of life – life filled with possibility and hope.

And I'll tell you, those words do not sound empty to me this morning.

Maybe what will come out of all this is a new kind of life where we are all get better at discerning the difference between empty words and those that are full of meaning and possibility and grace and hope. Maybe we will be better at practicing what we preach. Maybe our understanding will be deeper and our compassion broader. Maybe the words we use will have a fuller sense of meaning.

I stand in this empty room and, like those Easter women – those first great theologians and preachers of the church – I remember. I remember the words spoken here. I remember the lives we celebrate and the promises we make. I remember the hugs and the handshakes I hope to never take for granted again.

I remember and I try to imagine what new life will come out of this.

Maybe old Peter gives us a clue. Shockingly, Peter listened. Peter the big talker finally listens. And, if Peter gets any credit for being a great preacher, let's remember he was mentored by the women preachers of Easter.

Peter listened. And he knew these were not empty words because he acted: "he got up and ran to the tomb; and stooping" – maybe there was a lesson in humility there – "stooping, Peter looked in and saw the linen cloths by themselves" – he came face to face with that emptiness – and "then he went *home*, amazed at what had happened."

Peter was changed. Whatever he was feeling – whatever guilt or disappointment or loneliness or fear - Peter went home with a new sense of amazement.

I keep being in awe of what is coming out of people being at home. You've seen the posts. There's creativity and comedy and inspiration and revelation. There is, of course, also emptiness and boredom and loneliness and new awareness of privilege and deep fear.

There is no guarantee that all this emptiness will give birth to a new kind of life. People keep talking about a "new normal" and how the world will inevitably be changed by all this.

But the Easter story tells us that we can't take any of this for granted.

At the first sign of the dawning of a new day, there was an open tomb and a feeling of emptiness that turned into a frightening kind of new hope that could change everything. And when the women were reminded of the words of their beloved one and told the men, they were treated as if they were speaking empty words. Only one of them, an unlikely one at that, listened and acted and went home amazed. And he still had a long way to go.

Easter is no guarantee. But it is possibility. It is possible for emptiness to turn toward openness and to tentative – if not quite terrifying – hope; to discerning the difference between empty words and words that are full of life; to going home in some amazing new way.

The women and Peter had a choice to make on that Easter morning: To let their experience of emptiness open their hearts to the possibilities of new life or to stay locked up in the same old patterns of death.

And so, standing this empty sanctuary, I wonder: What kind of new life can come out of all this emptiness?

I remember all the times this room has been filled with the music of "Bring Us Home." I am in awe every time we sing it. For me, they are definitely *not* empty words. And that is no less true singing them now as scattered people in our own homes.

And I can imagine what it will be like for us to be together again. I can't wait for these pews to be filled with the Divine Radiance of you. I can't wait to see what new life will grow up among us. We can start that right now because, if you ask Peter what he learned that Easter morning from the women and his own experience of emptiness, he might say: Amazing possibilities can spring up at home, right where you are.

So today, once again we will sing “Bring Us Home.” It’s an invitation to remember and to imagine this time as home-schooling or boot camp or a maternity ward for the birthing of some new creation.

And, as we sing, if you hear the voices of one another in the echoes of your own home – today, if you hear God’s voice, for the world’s sake, for your sake, for God’s sake do not harden your hearts.