

“THE EMPTY TOMB”
MATTHEW 28:1-8
EASTER SUNDAY, 2020

When our expectations are unmet, fear is often our first reaction. We want facts; we demand truth that we can see, touch, feel, and hear. On the third day following his crucifixion, the women who loved Jesus walked together to where his body was awaiting burial, in a tomb guarded by Pilate’s soldiers. But it was not Jesus that they found that morning. From Matthew’s gospel, the 28th chapter, beginning at the first verse, what is the Spirit saying to us about our own expectations?

After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God’s angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn’t move.

The angel spoke to the women: “There is nothing to fear here. I know you’re looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.

“Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ That’s the message.”

The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. “Good morning!” he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, “You’re holding on to me for dear life! Don’t be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I’ll meet them there.”

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

I awakened Friday morning to a text from my brother in Florida. It said, “Pretty weird Easter weekend...” You’ve got that right. It’s pretty weird to be having Easter worship on Zoom when two months ago we were already planning an Easter Cantata for Palm Sunday and the flowering and raising of the cross in our sanctuary twice on Easter Sunday for two separate worship services.

Faith Formation was planning the Palm Parade and the Easter Egg hunt. Shirley and her helpers were planning our Easter brunch between services. I was fretting about the weather and whether it would hold for us and about lighting for the parking lot for our Maundy Thursday service. I was gleeful that we could advertise all our worship events on our new digital sign. Spring would be here soon!

We were all over our Easter plans for church. As March rolled in, many of us were already haggling about where the family would gather for Easter dinner and who would bring what food. “Who will bake the ham and what type of rolls will you be bringing? Should we invite Aunt Annie and Uncle George? Nah, he’s supporting the wrong guy for President, so let’s not get into that—they can go to eat with his brother and talk their own politics.”

Don’t those plans seem distant to you now? Like my brother said, “It’s a weird Easter weekend.”

Today I am especially reaching out to those of you who are quarantined in your rooms and not allowed to have visitors with you this Easter Sunday. I hope you all found your way onto our Zoom service so that we could be with you and you with us as best you could. Easter is a communal experience, even when community is defined in Covid-19 terms.

The women walked together to the tomb where the body of their Beloved Jesus was taken after his execution. This would not be a pleasant task—washing and preparing his torn and broken body for burial. At least Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent Pharisee, had treated Jesus with a measure of respect. At least he had seen to it that the body would be safe from wild dogs and marauding ruffians.

The two Marys, Mary Magdalene and another Mary who was not his mother, leaned on each other for support as they had so many other times for so many other bodies that had fallen prey to Pilate’s unpredictable anger and Caesar’s brutal oppression of the common people of Palestine. This was different though, at least for

Mary Magdalene, who had a complicated and emotionally intimate relationship with Jesus.

She didn't always understand him, and she didn't always agree with him. She didn't always travel with Jesus, but she always waited for him to return. It was surreal to her that he was gone, truly gone this time, never to return to her and his other close friends. The disciples and the women in the inner circle, his mother and other family, they were all in shock.

Jesus always walked and talked with such confidence. He stood up to the Pharisees and scribes, speaking his truth to them about love and justice. He was threatened before, but he always managed to avoid arrest. He steered clear of Caesar's soldiers, always keeping his followers close and out of harm's way.

Until Thursday. Until Judas gave him away. Until the soldiers came for him just after their final supper together.

Until Friday. Until his mock trial, a hasty death sentence, and an afternoon of horror. Until the disciples denied him and ran away afraid for their own lives.

Until Saturday. Until the women who loved Jesus gathered up their tears and their perfumes, fresh water and clean cloths. Until they found their group courage and made plans to go the next morning to his body, to the tomb guarded by soldiers.

Until Sunday. The weird Easter weekend culminated in the weirdest thing of all. The unbelievable, sleepwalking weekend nightmare found its apex of weird when they arrived at the site of the tomb. They expected there to have to stare down the soldiers. They expected to argue with them, hoping against hope they would be allowed inside to prepare Jesus for Jewish burial.

They didn't expect an earthquake.

They didn't expect an angel to appear at the tomb, an angel totally unimpressed with the armed guards, guards shaking and quaking in the boots by about now.

The two Marys were also frightened by the apparition. Their mouths hung open and they couldn't speak when the angel, rather proud of itself, glibly rolled back the stone and sat on it, legs crossed and swinging, lightning bolts shooting out in all directions.

Weird took on a whole new weirdness then for the angel spoke to them and showed them that Jesus was gone.

"He was raised, just as he said." The angel gave them no further explanation but directed them back to Galilee to await with the disciples for Jesus-Risen-from-the-Dead. They ran to tell the disciples this news. The text next relates that Jesus met them along the way. "Good morning!" he said to the women who were understandably frightened by yet another mysterious appearing. "Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and I'll meet them there."

Chris and I went to church on Friday. One of our church family was visiting the Memorial Garden. I walked the Labyrinth while Chris went into the sanctuary. It was so peaceful there! I rarely take the opportunity to just be there with no other agenda. What a gift.

I couldn't help but notice the parallel between what has happened in our church life and the story of the empty tomb. We are used to hustle and bustle in our church building, especially on Easter. We expect activity, kids running about hunting for treasures on the lawn, music filling the worship space, the cross flowered and the upper sanctuary beautiful with color and optimism.

Where is hope to be found in the empty church?

Where is hope to be found in the empty tomb?

We want to meet and greet each other this morning with hugs and laughter. We want to do right by Jesus and God with grand gestures and colorful rainbows, with our songs and prayers, and with a full house of worship.

Instead here I am alone again for the millionth time this week it seems in my home office in front of this lifeless computer screen. My Beloved is right down the hall with our dog, tuning in from his laptop a safe distance away. We are “doing” Easter. We are experiencing a weird Easter weekend. We are experiencing the empty tomb, up close and personal.

We are at the empty tomb and the angel of God is there teasing us, goading us, nay *inspiring* us to embrace the story of resurrection, the promise made good by Jesus that he would live on even after his death. The angel is here to assure us that we, too, will live on after Covid-19, we will live to tell our stories and live to write our histories. Generations already on the ground may remember bits and pieces like some of us remember bits and pieces of wartime, depression, dustbowl survival, presidential assassination, and 9/11.

Last week on Sixty Minutes was the story of how living Holocaust survivors from WWII are preserving the history of that evil time. Interviewed for several full days each, their answers are stored in computer memory and their likeness is preserved through holographic imagery. Visitors to the Holocaust Survivors Museum can ask the holograms questions, and the computer-generated memory will answer the inquiries directly from its database of real answers the survivors gave to their interviewers, thereby assuring that the first-person histories of Holocaust survivors will never be lost.

Generations following him remember Jesus though they never met him. Generations to come after us will remember the pandemic that stopped the world and forced it into quarantine, though they never experienced it themselves.

The angel tells us to embrace the weirdness of this weekend. The angel renews God’s promise to us that we will have life even in the midst of so much death. The helping angels we see every day on the news prove to us that we are not alone in our sorrows and our fears. The empty churches today are the empty tombs

of which stories will be told for countless Easters to come. Those of us living in these times will never forget Easter of 2020 anymore than the two Marys will ever forget Passover in the year 33.

We are stronger for our struggles.

We are bound together in our worldwide will to survive this coronavirus.

We are the disciples and the women of Christ.

We are Christ in the world now in ways we may have pooh-poohed before.

Roddy Hamilton wrote a poem I want to share with you. Thanks, Rev. Wendy Kidd, for sending this to me. It's entitled,

Sending: Empty Dawn

have you ever noticed
that it is the space that holds everything we believe
it is the gap
the lacuna
the void
in which we place everything we fundamentally believe

in that space
the emptiness
of tombs
lies the fullness of our faith

and in such spaces
we believe

when the void is found
the emptiness of the tomb is met
it is then we trust resurrection
and that what Jesus said
is true
we remember what he told us
and believe

it's kind of obvious that you need
an empty tomb for resurrection
but you need that emptiness
to have a full faith
filled with hope
and possibility
and what might be

so may we step into this emptiness
and believe
the life Jesus spoke of might be true
the love he held to might be true
the words he spoke might be true
because there is only space
where death ought to be

this possibility of life
this resurrection of spirit
in every empty space
is our new hope
go and believe into the void

posted on the **New Kilpatrick Parish Church** website. <https://www.nkchurch.org.uk/original-liturgy>

This is the angel's invitation for you this Sunday morning. Embrace the weirdness. *This* is our Easter in the year of our Lord, 2020, The Year of the Empty Tomb.

May It Be So.

donations gratefully accepted:

Zelle transfers (no fees charged!) use: treasurer@ucparkerhilltop.org

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