

“THE EMPTY TOMB (Part 2)”

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday 2021

April 4

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 a tomb where his body was awaiting burial. But it was not Jesus that they found that morning. From Mark’s Gospel, the 16th chapter, beginning at the first verse, what is the Spirit saying to us this Easter?

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they could embalm him. Very early on Sunday morning, as the sun rose, they went to the tomb. They worried out loud to each other, “Who will roll back the stone from the tomb for us?”

Then they looked up, saw that it had been rolled back—it was a huge stone—and walked right in. They saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed all in white. They were completely taken aback, astonished.

He said, “Don’t be afraid. I know you’re looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He’s been raised up; he’s here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now—on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You’ll see him there, exactly as he said.”

They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.

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

Look around these chambers. Shellie is panning the scene with her video camera. What do you see? Listen to the sounds of the empty sanctuary. What do you hear? Sense the feelings you have welling up in you as the second Easter has come during the pandemic and it is still not safe for us to be all together inside here. What is going on in your heart as you remember our Easter celebrations of past years? Did any of us last March, in our wildest dreams, imagine that we would not be back in the physical church by now?

Last year I told you of a text I received on Good Friday, year 2020. The message was from my older brother. He had simply typed, "Pretty weird Easter weekend." He was so right. It was surreal not to be in the church with all of you, excitedly and expectantly flowering the cross. I missed the pretty colors, dressed up people and excited children, eager for the Easter Egg Hunt on the lawn. I missed the sounds and smells coming up the stairs from Callahan Hall as a potluck was being set out for Hospitality Time in between worship services.

It was eerie not to hear Sue warming up the organ in preparation for "Christ the Lord Has Risen Today" and Julie and the choir not warming up their voices with some beautiful offerings of their own. Who would have thought we would be repeating the same experience in 2021?

But are we? Are we experiencing the same weird Easter weekend this year? I don't think so. While last year we were struggling to stay connected, struggling to have worship and struggling to envision a new beginning, an Easter beginning, today we are in a very different place.

The tomb is still empty, but we have a clearer understanding of Easter this year than perhaps we ever have had before. Resurrection comes in many images and constructions and whether Jesus' people ever see an image of the risen Christ is not the point. Easter means the tomb is empty; Easter means that at our death, our spirit travels to God and God is in charge of what happens next.

How is God working in our UCCPH resurrection story?

Well for starters, our will to remain a church family is greater than our consternation about how to make this relationship work online. God raised up skilled and determined people to help us get online and stay connected through worship and social opportunities.

Who would have traded away getting to see and connect again regularly with Jon Bond in the last year of his life? Wasn't it great that he could be comforted and supported in connectional ways in these past months? That's a God-shot if you ask me.

And who hasn't benefitted from seeing little Maggie Fahey grow before our eyes from a newborn to the 6+ month old she is today? Ashley and Brian were able to include her—and themselves—in worship regularly without risk to their baby and without having to miss church because of it being too cold or too snowy to drive here or because of too many germs around their child. That's another God-shot.

God has been at work, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in myriad ways. We have supported each other, prayed for one another, and stayed in touch through the mail, email, and telephone. How lucky we have been to appreciate technology rather than just taking it for granted.

When the two Marys were suffering intense grief over the death of Jesus, they stayed connected, too, leaning on each other and tending together to the ritual of the dead as they had been taught to do and had done so many times before. When their world turned upside down, they turned to family and friends for support. They did not yet know what it meant to be Easter people. They would spend the rest of their mortal lives exploring what it meant to be ministers of the risen Christ rather than disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. They would argue in the Upper Room whether Jesus had abandoned them or had

saved them, and just what that meant. They would not know of Easter Bunnies and flowered crosses; they would expend much of their available energy staying out of sight of the Roman guards and the temple lawyers.

What does it mean for us in 2021 to be Easter people? What messages come to our ears from the silence of this empty tomb, our sanctuary? What do we see when we look around and our pews are unoccupied? Yet, we also survey our Zoom Room Gallery and see the faces of those we love and trust—our wonderful church family, here, present, engaged, and communing together. This is also a God-shot.

This Easter again, like last Easter, we are worshipping live but virtually. But not the same, for we are not in the same despairing place. We have the length of experience behind us and the breadth of optimism beside us. We have survived; the tomb has not claimed us. The cross inspires rather than threatens us. Where at this time last year we largely perceived challenges, now we sense opportunities.

Easter is not about changing the heart of God. It's not the culmination of the life of Jesus high up on the cross, dying so that God will make nice again with the human race. I don't believe in a fickle God, one who be all-loving one minute and turn hard-hearted and condemning in the next. And if this is what Christianity continues to espouse then the church as we know it will die out as people rightfully turn away from that image of God.

Rob Bell, in *Love Wins*, says this about a church that promotes a God who cannot be trusted to love and accept us:

...if something is wrong with your God,
if your God is loving one second and cruel the next,
if your God will punish people for all of eternity for sins
committed in a few short years,

no amount of clever marketing
or compelling language
or great coffee
will be able to disguise
that one, true, glaring, untenable, awful reality.

Easter is not about one-upmanship. It's not a game of Our-God-is-More-Awesome-Than-Yours. It's not a time for Christians to say to persons of other faiths or lapsed faith or no faith, "We're in and you're out!" No, Easter is not about any of those things. It is about God being in relationship with the Creation, God loving humanity with all its doubts and faults. It's about Spirit giving Christians reason to take up the mantle of Jesus and spread the love of self to our neighbors, *especially* those who are the most vulnerable. I am thinking in these weeks, for example, of persons in America of Asian heritage who are under unwarranted attack from small-minded people, some of whom, by the way, identify as Christian.

I am thinking about trans persons, elderly persons who have lost their voice or self-determination, those who are imprisoned, homeless veterans suffering from addiction, mental illness, or unresolved PTSD, faithful gay and lesbian Catholics who have again been denied by their religion the ability to marry in the church, as well as male children of African descent and young girls of all races who are raised to protect themselves at all times. The categories of the marginalized are endless—no doubt you have others running through your mind now.

This is what Easter is about. Easter is about what Jesus was about—no more, and no less.

Rosanne French and Shellie Luallin sent me this story of a letter written six years ago. The man wrote:

"It is 31 degrees here this morning. I walked out into the driveway desperately looking for some infinitesimal sign of the approaching spring of 2015. It is after all the eighth of March.

Of course, there are a few daffodils pushing their green pointy leafy fingers up into the frosty air, but everyone knows that daffodils don't have any sense. They hoist their brilliant yellow tousled heads up into the air without regard for the temperature or timing, trumpeting the approaching spring. They are like overeager children with their enthusiasm overwhelming common sense. You just can't count on the narcissus family for any accurate weather predictions. In the last week or two, I have noticed the crowds of brilliant blonde flowers standing by the Gilmer County roadsides beckoning with false promises. You cannot trust a daffodil!

Many years ago when we lived in Jonesboro a thick patch of King Alfred daffodils stood in the backyard where they bloomed in profusion every spring. One March night during this particular spring we had a surprising dip in the temperatures. It registered in the low teens and froze the yellow blooms into stiff immovable statues. The next morning the wind picked up and blew so hard it broke the frozen stems and blooms off at ground level and sent them tumbling end over end down the small hill towards the lake. As they tumbled, the now fragile, brittle flowers broke into hundreds of pieces of bright yellow confetti littering the dry dormant grass in the back yard.

Knowing the shortcomings of daffodils and their unreliability I have to admit this modest plant I like better than most others. Their resurrection every spring gives me assurance and faith in the invisible things that reliably perform with no facilitating from me or anyone else. That enduring speck of unseen life wrapped, housed, and surrounded by layers and layers of the brown sleeping bulb is determined to continue performing as it always has. How I love those daffodils."

-- Thomas (Tommy) Bricker Daughtry

“[The] *resurrection every spring gives me assurance and faith in the invisible things that reliably perform with no facilitating from me or anyone else.*” This is the immutable lesson of the empty tomb, year after year.

Resurrection always comes out of the invisible things we cannot see and have to take on faith.

Have faith that in the coming year our church life will experience resurrection again, in ways we cannot now accurately forecast. For now, let's be like the daffodil leaves that are strewn hither and yon in the strong breezes they did not summon. Let us be the gold petals blowing everywhere, like confetti upon God's earth. Let us be the reminder that Easter is God's invitation to an eternal dance of unconditional love.

May It Be So.

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