

SERMON: When Empty is Full
TEXT: Luke 24:1-12

4-17-22

I was in my twenties when our church organist died. Karen's mother and my mother had been friends since childhood, and I had gotten to know Karen better when I began singing in the church choir. Her husband was the choir director, and they had two young children. Karen was 35 years old. After a long battle with cancer, she died at home on a Palm Sunday during church. And her funeral was on Maundy Thursday.

Her casket was open for a visitation at the church before the funeral. When I approached the casket to say a final goodbye, I didn't recognize her. It's not that the funeral home staff didn't do a good job with her hair and makeup. But it hit me that what I was looking at was just a body; not a person sleeping, in fact, not really a person at all. I remember thinking to myself, that's not Karen. Karen was not there in that body. It was empty of personality. Empty of spirit. Karen was gone. And all that was left was this vessel that held her.

That was the first time I understood - as well as any person can understand - resurrection. It was still a heartbreaking loss, of course. Especially when I thought

about her children, both under ten years old. I prayed that they would feel the presence and the fullness of her spirit within them and all around them.

“But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.’”

They did not find the body. The tomb was empty. For Christians, I think the image of the empty tomb has become as iconic a representation for resurrection as the bunny is for a secular Easter. In fact, I saw a photo just recently that seemed to be taken from the inside of the tomb, looking out at the brightness of a new day. And I thought, that’s not right. Even though it is dawn when the women arrive at the tomb, and the sun has risen in the sky, the really bright light is coming from inside the tomb, because the Son of God has risen from the dead! The empty tomb signifies new life, abundant life, eternal life, and the fullness of resurrection.

Now, the men in dazzling clothes who suddenly appear? That's even harder for me to get my head around than the empty tomb. I used to feel angry that the male disciples didn't believe the report from the women. But it does sound a bit crazy, no matter who's reporting. And I would wonder whether their grief or their lack of sleep or both was playing tricks with their minds.

But the question posed by the men in dazzling clothes answers the women's unspoken question, "where is Jesus?" Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

One commentary I read included a first-hand account from the author about her plans to travel to the Holy Land with a church group. Her husband was telling their teenage son that his mother would be going. "Why?" he asked. His father, taken aback at the need to state the obvious, responded, "Well, you know, Jesus." To this, the teen replied, "Tell her he's not there." (Lucy Lind Hogan, www.workingpreacher.org, April 17, 2022)

Another commentary said, "It is no exaggeration to claim that the discovery of the empty tomb is the heart of the matter for the Christian faith... The New Testament never suggests that the death of Jesus would have been adequate for

salvation apart from Jesus' resurrection. The two are fused so that neither can be considered apart from the other. It is not just that someone was raised from the dead but that God raised Jesus from the dead, and it is not just that someone was crucified but that the one who was crucified had proclaimed the kingdom and that his death was redemptive. The resurrection of Jesus is God's response to Jesus' death, God's vindication of Jesus, and God's validation of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom to the poor, the outcast, and the penitent... The defining conviction of the Christian hope is that because Jesus was raised from the dead the grave is not the final reality of human experience." (The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX, Luke, John)

Of course, there are those who want to dispute the resurrection on the basis of scientific impossibility. But it is not my job to prove that Jesus was really dead or that he actually appeared in bodily form to his disciples after his resurrection. But it is my job to help us all to awaken to all the ways in which we have experienced resurrection in our lives.

You might first become curious about it, having read the stories in the gospels. But in addition to that knowledge, we also need to feel it, to realize it, to discover it for ourselves. To listen to our own stories and others of times when emptiness became full. When darkness faded into light. When death led to new

life. When sacrifice brought about salvation. When weakness turned into strength. When tragedy ended in triumph. All such experiences are resurrection stories. And every one of us has at least one such story that we can tell.

In fact, our congregations each have resurrection stories. For Westminster, the lower level of the building was empty. There was no life left there. Until some Scout leaders looked at it and saw the opportunity for new life for Boy Scouts. And empty became full. And SEMO Prom Mothers, too, saw the emptiness and filled it with beauty and generosity and compassion for teen girls needing to belong.

And First Presbyterian also has empty space, but we have filled it in the past with warmth and welcome and nourishment for unsheltered neighbors. The empty is also filled once a month with teens who have become parents, and who need mentoring and encouragement to nurture and care for the new life they have brought into the world.

Even the cross, once an instrument of hatred and torture and execution - because of the resurrection - became a symbol full of salvation and mercy and love.

And what a marvelous image of fullness and life we witnessed on Palm Sunday as three churches came together to sing God's praises and to fill our hearts with joy and hope!

Finally, in honor of the people of Ukraine, let me share one of my favorite stories that took place a century ago. A Russian Communist leader named Nikolai Bukharin was addressing a huge assembly in Kiev on the subject of atheism. He concluded his speech saying, "There is no God. Jesus Christ never existed. There is no such thing as a Holy Spirit. The Church is an oppressive institution and is out of date. The future belongs to the State, and the State is in the hands of the Party."

Deafening silence filled the auditorium until an old priest stood and asked Bukharin, "May I say three words?" The lecturer disdainfully gave his permission. The priest then turned to face the crowd, looked out over all of them and shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "Christ is risen!" En masse the crowd arose as one and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: "Christ is risen indeed!"

People of God, the tomb is empty. Jesus lives. And our lives can be full of hope and promise. May we be witnesses to these things, to the glory of God!

AMEN.