

THE EMPTY TOMB

Text: John 20:1-18

LHUMC 4/20/14

(Places of Holy Week/Resurrection series)

I. Introduction

A. Finally, we are here.

1. After the parade, the waving palms, the shouting stones, after the schizophrenic crowds with their shouts of “Hosanna” that turned to “Crucify him”, after the Last Supper, and falling asleep in the garden, after the trial, and the betrayals, after the journey to Calvary carrying the cross, after the crucifixion, after the burial, and everything else in between, finally we are here.
2. It is the morning after the Sabbath, the first day of the week—Sunday for us.
3. We gather in this place where yesterday there had taken place a very unusual burial—there had been no crowds, no wailing women (those professional mourners who did that sort of thing so well).
4. It’s almost as if he was buried in secret, so that people wouldn’t know to come here and make a scene.
5. And they haven’t; it’s been a very quiet night—until sunset last night, everyone, even his closest followers, were still observing the Sabbath, which meant you weren’t supposed to be out and about.
6. And so they weren’t—I’m not sure if it was religious piety or just good old-fashioned fear that kept them away, but whatever it was, there’s been no one around.
7. The Romans kept a few soldiers on guard just in case something happened, but they had nothing to report, and so they’ve returned back to their barracks to get some sleep.

B. But now even before the sun rises, a woman comes up the path.

1. She enters this garden (yet another garden-what is it with gardens?).
 - a) This one is on the outskirts of the city, owned by Joseph of Arimithea, a place where he also happened to have a new tomb that had never been used.

- b) Knowing he had this spot open and available, it had been his intention when he asked Pilate for permission to take the body away to bring it here for burial.
 - 2. This place is typical for the time
 - a) With what is called an antechamber outside of the burial chamber itself—a place to sit and reflect or pray
 - b) And then the inner burial chamber, carved into the stone cliff—which had been and still should have been sealed by a large stone.
 - 3. “Should have been sealed”—perhaps the phrase that is the key to the whole story.
 - a) As Mary comes up the path, she notices something isn’t right.
 - b) The stone has been rolled away.
 - c) The tomb should have been sealed, but wasn’t.
 - d) And not only that, there is no one around who might have unsealed it.
 - e) And it would have taken a number of strong men to move the stone where it now was.
 - f) And she goes in, and finds the tomb to be empty of what she expects to be there.
 - g) Eventually, when she comes back here in her sadness and grief, it won’t be empty anymore—there will be two angels there to enlighten her as to what’s going on, but for now it’s empty.
 - 4. Her reaction and the reaction of those who first follow her back to this place is to be expected—you might call it “shock and awe”.
 - 5. They look first for a logical explanation—“Someone must have taken him somewhere else.”
 - 6. But in this story, in this place, there is no logic, only incomprehension.
- II. Being in this place reminds me of what I heard someone once say about the story that happened here—that the Easter story isn’t so much illogical as it is incomprehensible. How could the stone be moved away? How could the tomb be empty? It’s all inexplicable and downright incomprehensible. It’s probably the only story in our lives in which the power comes from the whole thing being so incomprehensible. It’s a

story that can never be “figured out”. And most of the time, we love to “figure things out”, and we are suspicious of what we can’t (as were those who were first at this place). So today if nothing else, maybe we realize as we gather in this place, that Easter is the day when we can for once claim the power and the glory in what is completely incomprehensible. That we don’t need to figure it all out, and that’s okay.

- A. When I was a kid, for a number of years, we lived in a house that backed up to a cemetery.
1. In our backyard was a huge willow tree that was very climbable, so what my little brother and I would do when something was going on in the cemetery, we would climb up in that tree to watch the action.
 2. And we didn’t go up there to mess around—we would watch the events unfold with a certain reverence and respect (or as much respect as a 11 year old and a 6 year old can have). On Memorial Day, when they’d have the ceremony with the 21-gun salute, that was the highlight of the year!
 3. And so when I first became a pastor, the interesting thing was that I knew pretty much what to do at funerals, at least the cemetery part, not because I had been in person to a lot of funerals, but because I had witnessed so many from afar, up in that willow tree.
 4. I bring those times up because every once in a while over in the cemetery, there would be what you could call an “empty tomb”—the backhoe guy would come out first thing out a dig a hole in preparation for a service later in the day.
 5. And the first couple times, my brother and I thought that was kind of cool—once the guy left, we’d climb over the fence and go over and peer in the hole.
 6. But after a while, we realized they were just holes, and the thrill wore off.
 7. For us, there was a logical explanation for those empty tombs.
- B. Contrast that to today’s scene— to have a stone rolled away, to have an empty tomb that had just been occupied, this place became a place that didn’t fit into Mary and the others’ limited understanding. The whole thing was incomprehensible.

- C. And it wasn't just the empty tomb itself--to witness first-hand God's power to overcome death was totally and absolutely incomprehensible for them as well. For they lived in a time and place where folks had a lot of first-hand experience with death. Those were tough times. And they knew, (or thought they knew) about the permanence of death as well.
- D. Living as we do in a time over 2,000 years later, when we have made incredible technological and medical advances to stave off physical death for as long as possible, some would say we still live in a culture where death, in perhaps more subtle and even spiritual ways, is still very much a part of our world.
1. Matt Fitzgerald in a recent *Christian Century*: "More than 15 years ago, when I lived in Minneapolis, my wife and I were invited to our neighbor's home for a dinner party. It was the dead of winter. Our hosts were a middle-aged Finnish couple named Eeva and Nils. The kind of gloomy northern Europeans who only come out of the sauna to drink and make sure the world hasn't become cheerful in their absence. I was assigned a seat between Nils and another young neighbor, a college student named Steven. This made me a referee in a drinking contest between a depressive Finn and an excitable frat brother. As the evening wore on and these two got deeper and deeper into their cups it became apparent that they approached life with starkly differing philosophies. Steven was concerned to make it big, earning the maximum amount of pleasure and success in the shortest possible time. Nils simply wanted to crawl into a dark room with heated rocks. Steven prattled on, "I should write a mystery novel. I could make a mint! Or maybe I could go to law school? What do you think?" And Nils answered, "What does it matter?" "Or I could get into computers. Maybe in some city with good rock climbing!" "Why bother?" "Honestly, I think what I should do is first learn how to sail and then become a doctor. I could retire early and live on my boat." "Or you could drown." It seemed not so much an argument as people from two different planets having a conversation. But behind Nils's and Steven's competing philosophies sat the same dead option. Both men believed in the

grave. Perhaps they had never been offered an alternative.
(*Christian Century*, 4/2/14, pp.10-11)

2. His point is that even in our long-living culture, we still know death.
 3. And so often we find it in these competing philosophies (that we probably have all experienced ourselves at one time or another)—on the one hand, those who have lost all hope, and on the other, those who are looking for hope in all the wrong places.
- E. And it is in this place, here at the empty tomb, where we realize that God offers us an alternative to all of that death in whatever form or attitude we find it in our world or in our lives.
1. For it is in this place that we find God's incomprehensible hope.
 2. In this place, we find God's incomprehensible grace and forgiveness.
 3. In this place, we find life—incomprehensibly abundant life, given to us as an Easter gift, to be lived like we never have before, as we seek and find hope in all the right places—those places that God has called us to go to share this gift of incomprehensible love that we have been given.
 4. In this place, we find the incomprehensible joy that comes from knowing that because this tomb is empty, we have been given the gift of eternal life in the presence of the one who was here, but isn't anymore.
 5. And in the meantime, because he isn't here anymore, that means he is still out there, in the world, urging us on, showing us the way, calling us to do things in his name that previously we would have considered to be completely incomprehensible.
- F. So...together on this Easter morning we celebrate what can't be figured out. We celebrate the incomprehensibility of it all. We celebrate God's incomprehensible gift that came to us at this place on that first Easter Sunday morning, a gift that remains with us even today.