

The Pilgrim Church of Duxbury  
Empty  
April 16, 2017  
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Tradition has it, that Mary and the other women, rose before the sky even began to lighten on the first morning after the Sabbath...the one right after the crucifixion. They gathered oils and spices and headed for the tomb where the men had put the body three days earlier. There had been no time to properly anoint his body then, so now the women would finish the job.

When they left the city walls they had to pass the place where the cross had stood. Even in the dark, Mary and the others would have known exactly where the cross had stood. As they approached it, they were flooded with memories. I wonder if they ran to get past that place...or covered their faces...or perhaps left the road altogether? We can't know, but somehow, they did and finally reached the tomb. There, any fear they felt was replaced by horror. The rock that sealed the tomb was gone. The tomb was wide open. It had been desecrated.

Despite their horror, Mary and the others went into the tomb and saw that Jesus was not there. Then angels appeared and rebuked them for looking for him in the tomb. Remember, they said... he told you...he has gone on to Galilee. Shocked they run back. Mary told Peter...but he did not believe her. None of them believed the women. So Peter went to see for himself only to find the tomb was empty...and to return bewildered.

We chuckle at the disciples not getting it. But imagine being the one to find the tomb empty just as dawn streaks the sky. Imagine share the news ... news you barely grasp...the tomb is empty. What now?

This question hangs over all the Biblical accounts of the first Easter. What now? Will the disciples stick around; go home; or go to Galilee? Will they embrace the seemingly impossible ending to the Holy Week story? If not, will there be a Christian faith? Easter is the lynch pin of our faith. Without Easter, there is no Christianity. Without the resurrection, Jesus is just another rabbi. It is the risen Christ that defines our faith and us. So, like the women and the disciples that morning, we too stand at the empty tomb and ask, what now? Like them, it all depends on whether we stick around to see what the story is saying to us and then if we make it a part of our lives.

The Easter accounts of the empty tomb hold three important messages for people of all times and places. The first is this: Jesus Christ is not an historical figure from the past. He is not a corpse on a cross or a ghostly figure making appearances to a chosen few. The risen Christ, Easter tells us, was then, is now, and will be forever...here, there, and everywhere.

In this morning's passage from Luke, Mary Magdalene is told by angels that Jesus has gone on before the disciples to Galilee. In John's Gospel, Mary actually speaks with Jesus. And, just as in this morning's passage, no one believes her. But then they began to see him. They saw him when they ate with a stranger; they saw him when fishing; they saw him when they were

in a locked room. They had lost the physical Jesus but gained the Spiritual Jesus who would be with them forever. What a wonderful gift to the disciples and followers of Christ...and now to us. But like many of the best gifts we get, it requires some adjustment on our part before we can appreciate it.

Have we all received a gift that challenged our ability to receive it? My brother once gave me a sweater that was the color of raspberry sherbet. My clothing palate at the time was navy blue and black. I was just out of college but looked younger than I was. I tried to compensate by looking as mature and professional as I could. This bright splash of color did not fit with the image I was trying to project. So, it went into the back of a drawer...for almost a year. Then one gray day I put it on to run errands. I ran into two friends who admired the sweater. In a store a neighbor came up to say how wonderful I looking in that color. At the corner fruit shop the owner said you look fantastic. By the end of the day the sweater was my favorite.

The resurrection is a gift just like that sweater. It requires us to push past our first reaction and be open to a new possibility. The disciples were sure Jesus was gone and all was lost. It was all over and done. But Easter brought a new day then that continues today...a day full of new possibilities.

The second message for us in the Easter story is this: Jesus is ahead of us...and is waiting for us. The angels tell the women that Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee, where most of the healings took place...where thousands were fed on next to nothing...where walking on water became possible. He

has gone to Galilee, where new possibilities happened for people almost every day and where brand new possibilities await us. Christ is waiting for us there. All we have to do is go.

Get up and go sounds easy but for the disciples it wasn't and neither is it for us either. The disciples were grieving and afraid. To go to Galilee meant leaving the safety of the house and risking arrest. It also meant letting go of their surety that all was lost. They were shackled by their fears & dedication to a man they believed was dead. They were stuck in their grief...stuck hanging onto memories...as if there was no future.

How often in life do we find ourselves in situations that we do not like and yet feel stuck with? Get to a point in a marriage when ending it looks like the only option...get a diagnosis that could result in death...lose a job that you think defines you...situations like these cause most of us to feel trapped. No amount of will power can change some things. Helpless to alter things we become paralyzed with fear and a hopelessness that makes us want to give up. It isn't until we get past these thoughts that we can realize the gifts that are always embedded in the tragedies of life. The end of a marriage or friendship can lead to personal growth and more mature relationships. The bad diagnosis can reunite fractured families and become a blessing. A lost job can open new possibilities that can be way better than the ones we want to cling to.

Jesus' death is like all the above. It seems to bring an end to hope and joy and peace and love. And if we hang onto the crucified Jesus we risk turning this into a reality. It is true that Jesus died but the larger truth is that it was and is not the end of the story. In fact, it is just the end of the first chapter of the story. Now Christ is risen and waits for us in Galilee, offering a new life, where the old rules and ways are rearranged into new possibilities we can hardly imagine. All we have to do is get up and go. But that means putting our hope in him. It means putting our lives in the hands of the risen Christ. It means trusting and depending on him...not ourselves.

The final message of the Easter story: let go of the historical Jesus and follow the Risen Christ. We have to let go of the past and embrace the future that only Christ offers. We must decide to look for Christ in everything we do, in everyone we meet, and every situation in which we find ourselves. This is the message of Easter. He is not where you think he is. He does not live in this sanctuary (although you might find it easier to access here). He is not here for safe keeping. Christ is out and about, walking and talking with people; sitting at bedsides; holding the condemned person's hand; laughing at the joys of life and crying at the sorrows; screaming with outrage at injustice and beaming with pride at our generosity. If we want to find Jesus we have to look for him.

Why do you think the tomb was empty on Easter morning? Why had the stone been moved? It wasn't so Jesus could get out...it was so we could get

in. We have to discover that the tomb is empty so we can move into the chapters of the story that have not yet been written.

Faith is not a passive thing. Technically the word faith is a noun but in practice it is a verb...active and requiring something of us. A few years ago, an Episcopal nun was asked in an interview what faith is and she said: "Faith...always involves commitment. Faith cannot be one facet or one aspect of my life, but my whole life. It is the holy Spirit who enable us to believe, but we must cooperate with all our powers. Many people think they have no faith...they do not realize that they must make a choice to believe, to take the risk of believing, of committing themselves and setting themselves to live out the commitment."

This is the Easter message. If we want to have faith we have to work at it. If we want the Easter promise of a new life for ourselves and our children then we have to make a commitment to finding it. We have to look for Jesus everywhere and in everyone. We cannot leave any stone unturned.

Today's message is clear. This is a new day. Jesus has gone on before us and is waiting for us. He is not in the past or in tradition. He is in the future. If we chose to follow we must keep our eyes peeled for signs of him...he is everywhere we go...showing us the way...if we but have eyes to see.

The good news today is that we never have been and never will be alone in this world. Jesus is here...waiting for us to notice...and to get up and follow him. Christ is risen...risen indeed...for us and for all generations. Alleluia.