

## The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Easter Sunday – April 30, 2018

Mark 16:1-8

*Alleluia! Christ is risen!*

On Easter Sunday, we celebrate more than the glorious resurrection of Jesus. We also rejoice that we, too, share in his resurrection and look forward to when death is forever defeated, God's kingdom fully reigns, and God is all in all. At that time, as Isaiah sings in his song of praise, "he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever." (Isaiah 25:7)

Chapters 24-27 of the Book of Isaiah are often referred to as the Apocalypse of Isaiah, because in them we hear common apocalyptic themes that history is quickly moving toward a final day of judgement when God will punish the wicked, redeem the righteous, and establish divine sovereignty over all creation.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 24 describes prophetic visions of judgement, worldwide destruction, and suffering – all resulting in chaos, cosmic upheavals, the tearing apart of nations, and the end of history.

In Chapter 25, from which we heard our first lesson this morning, Isaiah makes it clear that judgment and destruction are never God's intended last words. From the silence and ruins that remain from the time of judgment, we now move to the joy of a lavish and abundant feast where the host is the Lord. This is a spectacular vision of a banquet on Mount Zion, to which all people will be invited and at which the yoke of death will be forever destroyed. Redemption and deliverance are not for Israel alone but for all peoples who turn to God in faith and humility. It is a time for rejoicing in the Lord, who saved the people and now reigns in glory on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. God alone is king over all creation.

This hope and promise of God's reign coming fully to earth is at the heart of Easter. Through the long journey in the desert of Lent, we have prepared ourselves to receive God's redeeming grace and searched for those faint signs of God's in-breaking kingdom and new life being brought forth from our brokenness. We have sat in the emptiness and silence of Jesus' crucifixion and death, holding close the promise that God will raise him from the dead. But this morning, we proclaim God's fulfillment of his promises and we rejoice, boldly proclaiming in the Psalmist's words: "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it."! (Psalm 118:23-24)

Just two days ago, we remembered Jesus' death. He died in a way that was truly tragic, truly horrible, and truly unimaginable for the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, God's very own Son. For two days, his body has lain in a freshly hewn tomb, secured by a large stone. Today, in the faint light of early morning, three devoted followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, sorrowfully go to the tomb to finish preparing his body for burial. These women had been with Jesus throughout his crucifixion and death. They knew where the tomb was for they had accompanied Jesus' body and watched as he was laid there. This morning they return, but instead of finding a dead body, they witness the impossible.

When they arrived at the tomb, they were surprised to find that the large stone enclosing the tomb was already moved away. With trepidation they entered and found Jesus' body to be

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<sup>1</sup> Balentine, Samuel E.; *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); 359

gone. Instead, they encountered an angel who said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” (Mark 16:6) The angel then tells them to leave and tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus.

This is a story that we know so well, right? All during Holy Week, we have waited with baited breath to finally get to Easter Sunday when we hear the great and joyous news we’ve been expecting: Jesus has been raised from the dead! After two thousand years of retelling this story, I think we’ve forgotten just how very, very weird and startling this story is! But the gospel lesson that we heard this morning from Mark reminds us just how shocking it was then.... and still should be today.

Mark’s Gospel is thought to be the earliest written of the Gospels, and his Easter account is steeped deeply in the more immediate newness of this –the weirdness – the awe-some-ness and frightening power of what God has done. In this account, Mary, Mary, and Salome are thunderstruck – terrified by what they have encountered. Upon hearing from the angel that Jesus has been raised and to go tell the others, Mark says they “fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8) Their fear and speechlessness underscore for us how mighty and fearsome an act God has done.

This is an abrupt ending to this passage – one that makes most of us uncomfortable. This lesson seems almost to be more like an extension of Jesus’ passion rather than a joyous proclamation of his resurrection. We want to fill the gap by reading further into the chapter and clinging to one of the two alternative “endings”, each thought to have been later additions to Mark’s Gospel and which make a point to say that the women did in fact go and tell the others what they witnessed. No doubt these were written by those who were too uncomfortable with leaving the “good news” ending in this way.

The specific details of who did what and how the others found out may not be that important after all, for nothing this big remains quiet for long. While the evangelists may differ on the details of that morning, they all agree on one thing: that the tomb which had held Jesus’ dead body is now empty. And it is this emptiness that we celebrate with our joyous shouts of Alleluia!

It has always been curious to me that the most relevant symbol of Easter is the empty tomb. Not eggs, bunnies, or candy, but an empty tomb – something much more elusive and mysterious. It is hard to capture emptiness – it can’t really be depicted and it certainly cannot be domesticated.<sup>2</sup> Emptiness is wild and uncontrollable – a vacuum is a powerful force, indeed. This is one of the reasons that the fierce landscapes of the desert are always so frightening. There is nowhere to hide and nothing to see and, yet, powerful and invisible forces are most certainly present.

In his book, *Whistling in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner describes the challenge of the symbolism of the empty tomb. He says that “you can’t make it into pageants and string it with lights. It doesn’t move people to give presents to each other or sing of songs. It ebbs and flows all around us, the Eastertide. Even the great choruses of Handel’s *Messiah* sound a little like a handful of crickets chirping under the moon.”<sup>3</sup>

This emptiness may, in fact, be the only way to truly capture the power of Easter. How else can we envision the divine depth and breadth of God’s promised everlasting love for us? No “thing” can describe it in its fullness; no “thing” can contain it. This emptiness is beautiful,

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<sup>2</sup> Buechner, Frederick; *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperCollins, 1993); 46

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

frightening, and glorious beyond measure. Encounter with the empty tomb will leave you forever changed – you are never the same person afterwards.

The empty tomb shows, perhaps in the way only it can, the boundless love God has for his Son and for his beloved creation. This love is a sacrificial love – it is a love that is a pouring out of oneself into the other; a full and complete giving and emptying of oneself for the beloved. In the grandest way, the empty tomb is a paradox wherein the symbol of the *fullness* of God's love and will is *emptiness*. And it is in this divine emptiness of *no*-thing that we find *every*-thing for which our souls yearn. It is from what we encounter in this emptiness, that we go forth and rejoice, with dance and song, in our renewed life reclaimed from death.

This morning, the empty tomb is the dramatic sign that the impossible has happened: Jesus has been risen and we also have risen with him. And our new home is found in the resurrection – in the surprising joy and fullness of the empty tomb. We are no longer adrift on the shifting sands of despair and death but, impossibly, our lives are now rooted in the glorious emptiness of God's love. It is there that we find our true identities as people of the Resurrection. And in the face of God's everlasting love and faithfulness, how can we do anything else but sing God's praises – rejoice and be glad in it?

Amen.