

The Empty Tomb

*A homily by The Rev. Br. AJ Jonah
for St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Lebanon, OR
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Easter Year A
(John 20:1-18)*

*"...The disciples then returned to their homes."
But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping.*

The disciples' response to the empty tomb is wildly different from Mary's. Our response to the empty tomb can be wildly different, too. Sometimes we stare in disbelief, other times we walk away and head home to something that makes more sense. Sometimes we try to avoid it at all costs. We avert our eyes and try to look ahead and skip the empty tomb bit. At least if Jesus were in the tomb it would make some sense. But, instead, they find neatly folded linen and an empty tomb. Simon Peter and the other disciple returned to their home. Mary, however, remains outside the tomb weeping. This year Easter feels like we're standing outside the empty tomb weeping as Mary did. This year Easter is less trumpets-sounding and organ fanfares, and more of a muted joy. This year we won't flock to our churches for Easter, instead, we remain standing outside the tomb. And that's okay. It's okay that the magnitude of Jesus' death brings us to tears and disbelief that he could possibly rise again. Especially this year when a bodily resurrection can seem more far-fetched when so many are dying daily from the Corona Virus. This year, when we cannot enter into our churches and are instead quarantined in our homes, we, like Mary stand weeping at the empty tomb. The disbelief holds us in place. We cannot return home and to our lives like the other disciples did.

There is no new normal.
Not after Jesus' death and resurrection and
not after we've sheltered-in-place for months.
Instead, we stand still, outside the empty tomb.
Maybe we're struggling to recognize Jesus even as he stands right in front of us.
Maybe our grief and our fear blind us right now.
That's okay.
What the disciples experienced,
as they witnessed Jesus' death,
is a trauma,
so to come to visit him at his tomb and him be gone.....
I imagine they had a rush of emotions .
I can sense the anguish, agony, disbelief, and distress.
And, for us, as we experience a different kind of trauma,
when we come to stand at the empty tombs of our streets, our stores,
our hopes, we turn to Jesus.
Jesus shows us that life conquers death, even death on a cross.
And that can seem unbelievable at best, and useless at worst right now.
Like, so what?
Jesus rose from the dead, but that's not going to bring those who've died from
Corona back.
The tomb was empty for Jesus, but there are mass graves in New York.
And yet, somehow, the empty tomb isn't the end of the story.
That, somehow, life will go on after this
. I don't think it'll ever truly be the same, but it will continue.
This isn't forever.
God's promises are forever, God's love is forever,
but our current circumstances are not
and that's where the hope of the gospel comes in.
I've been pondering what it will be like after the stay-at-home order is lifted,
how long will it take before we feel safe to hug one another again,
to go out without a mask and gloves,
to trust that it'll be okay.
That's the hope and trust that can be found in Jesus
but that is in short supply in the world, especially now.

So, I don't have a shiny, new thing to share;
I don't have a new insight into this story.
I have the same news that we share every Easter:
Alleluia. CHRIST IS RISEN!
Somehow, CHRIST IS RISEN.
Somehow, the tomb is empty.
Somehow, we, too, will rise.
Somehow.
Like a phoenix from the ashes,
We'll rise again.
The tomb is empty.
We needn't return home to hide,
We needn't weep outside the empty tomb,
It's not about what lessons this is teaching us,
It's not about the strength we're gaining from this,
It's okay if it's breaking you down, it's okay if it's too much for you.
The truth is that it is too much. And so we weep.
Weep for sorrow that the tomb is empty,
and weep for joy that Jesus has risen, and we will, too.
I think Mary has something to teach us.
That sometimes we need to wait and weep.
That it's okay to have joy that's mixed with disbelief.
That life of faith isn't one that's necessarily free of doubt and uncertainty.
Mary teaches us that it's okay to take a moment to pause.
That when we stare into the empty tombs of our lives, weeping is understandable.
Yes, there are the shouts of alleluia, and running to tell the disciples when she
meets Jesus later, but before that...she weeps at the empty tomb. What if the
reading ended there? What if the rest was lost? How would our experience of Jesus
be different? Would it be different if Jesus was not seen after his resurrection? I
don't know, but I wonder...

And, yes....the story doesn't end there.
Mary meets Jesus whom she believes to be the gardener.
She then recognizes him as her teacher.

And yes, the day will come when we will once again embrace one another and celebrate the Eucharist together.
The day will come again, we will dance, we will sing,
We will rejoice in the streets, we will rebuild,
As Jeremiah proclaims in the Hebrew Scripture lesson from today.
So, until then, we are called to seek the things from above, as the Epistle states.
That means seeking the way of Jesus, always.
And, right now, that means washing our hands,
That means wearing a mask,
That means keeping ourselves physically distant.
Right now it means gathering, while dispersed.
We are capable; we are equipped; we are called.
Together, we'll get through this, even when we're apart.
For now, rejoice, my friends, for Christ is risen! Alleluia! Alleluia!

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Readings follow:

Jeremiah 31:1-6

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.

Thus says the Lord:

The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,
the Lord appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel!
Again you shall take your tambourines,
and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

Again you shall plant vineyards
on the mountains of Samaria;
the planters shall plant,
and shall enjoy the fruit.
For there shall be a day when sentinels will call
in the hill country of Ephraim:
“Come, let us go up to Zion,
to the Lord our God.”

Here ends the Lesson.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Confitemini Domino

1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; *
his mercy endures for ever.

2 Let Israel now proclaim, *
"His mercy endures for ever."

14 The Lord is my strength and my song, *
and he has become my salvation.

15 There is a sound of exultation and victory *
in the tents of the righteous:

16 "The right hand of the Lord has triumphed! *
the right hand of the Lord is exalted!
the right hand of the Lord has triumphed!"

17 I shall not die, but live, *
and declare the works of the Lord.

18 The Lord has punished me sorely, *
but he did not hand me over to death.

19 Open for me the gates of righteousness; *

I will enter them;

I will offer thanks to the Lord.

20 "This is the gate of the Lord; *

he who is righteous may enter."

21 I will give thanks to you, for you answered me *

and have become my salvation.

22 The same stone which the builders rejected *

has become the chief cornerstone.

23 This is the Lord's doing, *

and it is marvelous in our eyes.

24 On this day the Lord has acted; *

we will rejoice and be glad in it.

Colossians 3:1-4

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Here ends the lesson.

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings

lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Here ends the lesson.