**Empty Cross, Empty Tomb**

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**Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017**

**Nutana Park Mennonite Church**

**Scripture: Mark 15:42-16:8**

{{IMAGE 1 – the empty cross}}

It’s Easter morning, and the cross stands empty. No longer is the tortured figure stretched across its beams. This morning the women, Jesus’ friends, approached the tomb and also found it empty, the broken, lifeless body no longer housed within it. And today we revel in that redemptive emptiness, the emptiness that is a central symbol of resurrection and new life.

This morning, through images and words, I would like to explore these twin themes of the empty cross and the empty tomb, reflecting on what God is doing in the emptiness – or even how this emptiness represents our redemption.

**THE EMPTY CROSS**

All year, we have an empty cross at the front of our sanctuary, but today it takes on an additional layer of significance. It becomes the empty cross of resurrection. We remember, first of all, that it was not always empty – that mere days ago, there was a tortured figure hanging from it. We are so used to thinking of the cross as a symbol of our faith, that it can be easy to forget that in first-century Palestine, under Roman occupation, the cross was a symbol of terror and death – a tool used to execute those deemed a threat to the Roman dictatorship. If we wanted to update the symbol, we might use an electric chair, or a lethal injection table! People did not consider the cross in any way a beautiful or comforting symbol. It represented violence and fear.

{{IMAGE 2 – Joseph and others take Jesus’ body down}}

But as we remember that the cross was not always empty, we can also notice the obvious: that it has been emptied. Our Gospel reading this morning gave us a glimpse into that act of mercy, as Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus’ more well-to-do and influential followers, makes sure his body does not remain crucified. We read in Mark that Joseph “went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” Imagine, he’s outing himself as someone who is in some way allied with Jesus, who has just been executed as a traitor to Rome – something Jesus’ disciples were too afraid to do, especially Peter, who turned down three chances to do so. Pilate, interestingly, “granted the body to Joseph,” after checking to make sure that Jesus was already dead (Mark 15:43-45).

And then we have one of the most tender verses in this whole narrative. We have heard about all of the abuse Jesus’ body underwent, but here is someone who treats his body with mercy and tenderness. “Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock” (v. 46). In doing this, Joseph effectively un-crucifies Jesus! He takes Jesus down from the cross and respectfully – even lovingly – lays him to rest. It is Joseph of Arimathea here, who “boldly” empties the cross. We have him to thank for our empty – or rather emptied – crosses.

So what does this have to do with us today? Are we simply to be thankful for the emptiness of the cross before us? Well, it might not seem appropriate to speak about on Easter Sunday, but crucifixes – crosses with Christ still on them – remind us of one crucial thing: that the reality of suffering is still with us. Theologian Dorothee Soelle puts it this way: “Jesus continues to die before our eyes; his death has not ended. He suffers wherever people are tormented.”[[1]](#footnote-1) So Jesus remains, in one sense, upon the cross. Blaise Pascal – 17th-century mathematician and philosopher – similarly wrote, “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world: we must not sleep during that time.”[[2]](#footnote-2) From the context of El Salvador, theologian Jon Sobrino speaks along the same lines of the poor and oppressed of the Global South as “the crucified people,” and of the Christian calling to “mercy” – urging that “we take them down from the cross.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In our culture, we’re not encouraged to face our own suffering, let alone that of others. But people around us are “crucified” by all kinds of meaningless suffering: people remain on the crosses of crippling anxiety; of abusive and broken relationships; of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia; of meaninglessness and despair; of illness; of grief and loneliness; of addictions; of poverty; of war. Soelle continues, “It is easy to overlook the crosses by which we are surrounded.”[[4]](#footnote-4) But God does not want us – any of us – to remain upon those crosses. God does not want our suffering, but our love. In other words, it’s not our suffering that saves us, but our love for God, each other, and ourselves. God wants us to alleviate one another’s suffering by being like Joseph of Arimathea, and taking one another down from the cross. We’re called to be a community that takes one another down from these crosses, and that spreads that cross-emptying love to all of the “crucified” today.

{{IMAGE 3 – the women enter the empty tomb}}

**THE EMPTY TOMB**

The cross is not the only “empty” symbol we have for Easter. We also turn this morning to the empty tomb, approaching it with the women who, like Joseph of Arimathea, are determined to care respectfully, tenderly, lovingly for Jesus’ body, which underwent such terrible, dehumanizing violence at the end. So we read that “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid,” or saw where Joseph buried Jesus (Mark 15:47). And two days later, after they’ve rested on the Sabbath, the women return at dawn to the tomb, prepared with “spices” for “anointing” the body (16:2). They return to the tomb, and we go with them, to bend and look inside, our eyes adjusting to the darkness, expecting to see death there, where we had left it.

But they – and we with them – don’t find it. As they set out, they worry about the huge stone, wondering how they will move it – it seems that even their combined strength would not be enough to “roll” it away from the mouth of the tomb. But when they get there, someone has already rolled away the stone, already opened the grave. That is their first hint that things are “off.” And then, they discover something even more unsettling: the tomb is empty, the body gone, and a mysterious “young man, dressed in a white robe” is sitting in the tomb with a perplexing, impossible message for them: “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him” (16:5-6). The Gospel of John adds the detail that Jesus’ graveclothes, the linen in which Joseph of Arimathea had wrapped the body, were lying there, empty and folded (John 20:6-7). “He has been raised; he is not here.” Jesus has somehow resisted and overcome his violent death. And the women, Jesus’ friends, can’t believe it.

Mark, perhaps more than the other Gospels, goes out of his way to emphasize just how jarring the sight of the empty tomb really is. In Mark, Jesus remains conspicuously absent. Other Gospels have him appearing briefly to the women or to the disciples, or reassuring Mary Magdalene, who mistakes him for the gardener in her grief. But Mark’s original ending is what we heard read today – the abrupt, jolting, fearful ending. You see the messenger or angel invites the women to pass along the message he has given them: “go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:7-8). That’s it – that’s the original ending of Mark. The empty tomb was so terrifying to the women that it was unspeakable – they did not tell anyone what they had seen and heard; they immediately failed to deliver the angel’s message.

Now if the Gospels – literally meaning “good news” – are meant to inspire faith, I think maybe Mark has got this a bit wrong. Did he really mean to end his Gospel there, with the decidedly un-inspiring image of these women panicking and fleeing from the empty tomb in silence? The other Gospels don’t leave us hanging there, but conclude with the reassuring resurrection appearances of Jesus himself. Someone even attempted at some point to tack on a bit of a happier ending to the Gospel of Mark, adding something about Jesus appearing to the disciples and giving them the power to heal and speak in tongues and all kinds of miraculous things (vv.9-19). And of course, we’re drawn to those more reassuring endings.

{{IMAGE 4 – empty tomb – Christ is Risen!}}

But what might it mean to remain with the original ending of Mark, to linger at the tomb and to reflect on its emptiness? It’s easy to go through the motions of Easter without realizing just how unsettling it really is to witness this kind of a reversal in the order of things. In the midst of their deep grief, the women find new life at a tomb. Against all our expectations, the tomb here becomes a womb, giving birth to new life. And so we are left with two symbols that once represented death – the cross, the tomb – which, once emptied by the life-giving power of God, come to represent resurrection, which is simply the mystery and the reality that God’s love is more powerful than suffering, violence, or even death itself. God can bring life even out of the torture of a cross, even out of the silence of the grave.

And that’s not all. Mark’s ending leaves us with one more word of wisdom. The angel tells the women that Jesus “is going ahead of you to Galilee.” Jesus “is going ahead of you” – and by implication, the women and the male disciples are to follow Jesus! Within the message of the angel – the message that the women, in their fear, supposedly failed to pass along – is Jesus’ consistent invitation to come, follow him, to be his friends, walking together in his way of love and life. So we too are invited to participate in the cross-emptying, grave-emptying, life-giving love of God. In Jesus’ absence at the end of Mark, Jesus in essence passes the torch to his male and female disciples, making space for them to take up his ministry of emptying the crosses on which we suffer and the tombs which silence and frighten us. So this small statement – “Jesus is going ahead of you” – becomes our calling as the church, the living Body of Christ, to embody the empty cross and empty tomb through teaching, healing, feeding, peacemaking, and relationship-building. Thereby, we begin to chip away at the destructive powers of suffering and death that still dominate us and our world.

Biblical scholar Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza puts it this way:

“The empty tomb does not signify absence but presence. It announces the Resurrected One’s presence on the road ahead, in a particular space of struggle and recognition such as Galilee. The Resurrected One is present in the ‘little ones,’ in the struggles for survival of those impoverished, hungry, imprisoned, tortured, and killed, in the wretched of the earth. The empty tomb proclaims the Living One’s presence in the ekklesia [church community] of wo/men gathered in Jesus’ name, in the faces of our grandmothers who have struggled for survival and dignity. Jesus is going ahead – not going away: so the women in the Gospels, and we with them, are told.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

So today, as we celebrate the Easter emptiness of both the cross and grave, let us remember that that this emptiness is truly where we find God – in taking each other down from our crosses, and in leading each other out from the various tombs that we experience, we are renewed, even resurrected, into the new life in the community of love that God has called us to be in this hurting world.

I’ll leave you this morning with words from Jan Richardson’s “Blessing for Easter Sunday”:[[6]](#footnote-6)

You had not imagined  
that something so empty  
could fill you  
to overflowing

and now you carry  
the knowledge  
like an awful treasure,  
or like a child  
that roots itself  
beneath your heart:

how the emptiness  
will bear forth  
a new world  
that you cannot fathom  
but on whose edge  
you stand.

So why do you linger?  
You have seen  
and so you are  
already blessed.  
You have been seen  
and so you are  
the blessing.

HALLELUJAH. AMEN.

1. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 139-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in Dorothee Soelle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology After the ‘Death of God’* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Soelle, *Suffering*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jan Richardson, “Seen: A Blessing for Easter Sunday,” http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/04/06/easter-sunday-seen/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)