

EASTER EMPTINESS

Sermon for Easter - Jn 20:1-18

LPC, 3/31/13

9-11 happened at a time when I was doing field work at a parish where the assistant was retired military. He lost friends in the attack on the Pentagon and was actively involved in consoling several families. Military families, he said, are often better prepared than most for the sudden death of a loved one, but somehow what made the 9-11 bereavements worse for many was not even having a body to honor and bury.

This may not make rational sense but it makes human sense. The one thing worse than having the body of a loved lying in a tomb is knowing your loved one is dead and not having the body in the tomb.

This is the situation in which Mary Magdalene finds herself on Easter morning. She had been grieving for Jesus; now she is distraught. The most likely explanation for the emptiness of Jesus' tomb is that Jesus' enemies have robbed and desecrated it. It isn't bad enough that Jesus died in disgrace; now, apparently, his corpse has been abused, possibly displayed to mockery then disposed of like so much garbage.

No wonder Mary is upset. What else could the empty tomb possibly mean? And she had thought things could get no worse.

Mary can't bear this latest insult alone so she goes to tell Jesus' other friends. They rabbit off to verify her report. We are told the second disciple "believed," but what exactly did he believe? Neither he nor Peter understands the reality of the resurrection. Awareness may be starting to set in, but the two men do not appear to have any strength of conviction. They turn around and go home.

Poor Mary. Jesus' friends have not been much help. She remains in tears at the empty tomb.

The version of the first Easter morning we heard today is from the Gospel of John. As you know, there are four Gospels, and they each tell of the resurrection in their own way. But all four versions feature this empty tomb.

Emptiness is usually regarded as a negative: something is missing – something is wanting. Emptiness was certainly a negative so far as Mary was concerned. She had been counting on the presence of Jesus' body and was therefore dismayed. The wounds of her grief reopened and bled.

But Easter emptiness is not a negative. Easter emptiness is something inconceivably wonderful. Think of the symbolism here. The tomb stands for death, does it not? What the *empty* tomb signifies once for all is the ultimate emptiness of death itself.

With Jesus' resurrection, death is null and void. Death is emptied of power and mean. Death is literally a vacated judgment. No longer can death have power over us.

In a way, death turns out to be like the Wizard of Oz – a dreadful apparition which is unmasked to be a charlatan operating a machine of smoke and mirrors.

On Easter, we not only celebrate the life of Christ, and our new life in him, we celebrate the death of death. Death has been disarmed by God and has no further power over us. And if death cannot hurt us, what can? Nothing. This is the Lord's work and it is marvelous in our eyes.

Good old faithful Mary does not yet understand all this till Jesus, the living Jesus, calls her by name. Mary may have been the one friend most ravaged by Jesus' death. Now she is the first to know and understand that Jesus lives. And that if he lives and she believes, nothing can truly hurt her ever again.

He lives. Believe. Nothing can truly hurt us again. Death is vanquished, We are free. Christ has won the victory.