

## EMPTY

### Sermon for Easter A: Jn20:1-18

LPC, 4/16/17 (Adapted from one originally preached 3/23/08)

When I was little I was convinced there were monsters in my closet who came out after dark. Like many parents, my father would open the closet door and riffle through the clothes to show me that there was absolutely nothing in the closet that could hurt me.

Today is Easter. Like Mary Magdalene and the disciples in today's gospel reading, we come this morning to an empty tomb. And whereas we might well imagine that a tomb, a place for dead bodies, might contain something alarming, like my closet the tomb contains nothing that can harm us.

The tomb of course is not completely empty. When Mary leans over to look into the tomb, she sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the foot.

If you were immersed in Hebrew scripture, this would remind you of something. The Hebrew scriptures contain a very specific description of something called the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was created according to specifications revealed by God, to house the original tablets of the law, which had been inscribed by God's own hand. The Ark of the Covenant had profound meaning for the Hebrew people, signifying God's very presence among them.

It was very important for the Hebrew people to believe that God was present with them in a very real and physical way. At the same time, God was believed to be unspeakably holy. Therefore there were very strict regulations about how the Ark of the Covenant was to be designed and handled.

The Ark was to be surmounted by two winged cherubim facing outward in a posture of defense. Cherubim in Hebrew Scriptures were definitely not cherubs, little cute winged babies. Hebrew cherubim were huge and dangerous, armed and terrifying. Their purpose was to defend the holiness of God. And apparently they did. The scriptures have multiple stories of unworthy people who gazed upon the Ark or handled it improperly. These people either died instantly or were put to death.

Did you see the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? The climactic scene of this film shows what happens when unworthy people open the Ark of the Covenant. They die gruesomely, their flesh melting while they still breathe. The hero and heroine of this movie escape annihilation only by closing their eyes and averting their gaze from the holy of holies. No one can gaze upon God and live. No one can even gaze upon the dwelling place of God and live.

Like the Ark of the Covenant, the empty tomb has been the resting place of God himself. Jesus, the Son of God, has been laid to rest there, quite, quite dead. And like the Ark of the Covenant, this resting place of God is flanked by two winged angels. But they

are not the terrifying cherubim. These angels speak to Mary not in forbidding and threatening tones but almost in an expression of concern, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

Mary is distraught at the idea that Jesus’ dead body has been removed, turns for help to someone she assumes may help, the caretaker perhaps. But the caretaker calls her by name and Mary recognizes the living Jesus.

Now this is a switch. The face of God is no longer so terrible that it melts your flesh from your bones. The face of God in Jesus is a human face, so homely it can be mistaken for that of a groundskeeper. The face of God is one that calls you by name and gazes upon you with love. The face of God has seen death and lives, so that now we too can gaze upon death and live. Nothing need terrify us any more

The tomb is empty. There is nothing there any longer that can terrify. Not betrayal, not humiliation, not abandonment, not loss of control, not death itself. There is nothing there to fear at all. Jesus has shown the tomb to be as empty of danger as my bedroom closet.

And the face of God is the face of the beloved, the face of life itself. Life is all new.

This Easter is a new morning: a chance for us, thanks to Christ’s triumph, to turn away from our closets and tombs of fear and look for the face of God among the living.