

“With Fear and Joy”
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Matthew 28: 1-10

Is it true? It is true what the Mary's said? The stone was rolled back from Jesus' tomb? Is it true that an angel of the Lord appeared before them? Is it true the body was gone? And could it really be true, what happened next? Could it really be true that Jesus appeared before these women? That he, who so recently hung on a cross, who we know was dead and buried, that he, Jesus, spoke directly to them? Could it really be true?

An outsider might think that Easter is an important day for us as Christians because it gives us answers. Answers about who Jesus is, answers about God, answers about the meaning of life. They might think that this is the day that wraps up the story of Jesus nice and neat, packaged with a bow. For some, Easter Sunday might seem like the last chapter in a really good book or at the very least, the period at the end of a complex sentence. It's what we come to expect, that something this grand and this important and this celebrated will give us answers to any and all questions we have ever had, especially all the tricky ones about Jesus and what it means for him to be the Son of God. Certainly, the disciples kept anticipating, if not in the moment of resurrection, some moment when they would suddenly understand everything and finally have their questions answered clearly and concisely. The disciples were known for their endless questions, so we all hope for them that this, this all-important day of resurrection, will finally give them the answers they have been looking for.

Unfortunately for the disciples, and unfortunately for us, in the Easter story, we don't see a lot of questions being answered. What does happen is we witness the life-altering moment when first the two Mary's and then the other disciples realize that Jesus' body is gone. We watch as the two Mary's encounter the angel and then Jesus himself, slowly realizing who he is, listening to his words and finally following his command to tell the others. But we don't see questions answered. We see some

understanding of what is going on, but this is not the day to process everything that has come before and everything that is yet to come. This is not the day when Jesus sits the disciples down, holds their hand, and patiently explains everything they have ever wondered about, without parables or double meanings, just by using plain, direct language they can understand. That does not happen on this morning.

That first Easter morning is not about having all the answers. It is not about concluding the story. On Easter morning, the story is just beginning, and the answers the disciples seek have only begun unfolding.

Easter morning is about the possibility of what is still to come. The Easter story is less about self-assuredness and more about hope. It is about taking something that we thought was done and over and opening it back up, realizing that it is only the beginning, realizing there is so much more to come, and as a result, there are more answers to seek, and more learning and understanding to be done. I would say that on Easter morning there is no period at the end of a sentence, there is only a coma, waiting for what is next.

So often when we seek answers, we are really looking for the end, whether it is the end of a story or the end of a discussion, but on this Easter morning, the empty tomb, is not a sign of the end, it is a sign of the beginning. Let me explain:

When I see something that is empty, in it is an invitation to fill it. For example, an empty lot waits for an architect's dreams to transform it into the foundation of a new building. An empty field waits for a farmer to plant her seeds so that the field can be filled with fruits and vegetables and flowers. An empty baby book waits for a tiny child to be born, and for his parents to fill its pages with details of their baby's firsts: first laughs, first steps, first trip to the zoo. An empty mixing bowl waits for the baker to add ingredients, transforming them into dough before filling a previously empty oven with the fresh bread, filling a house with its warmth and yeasty smell.

It is said that when JRR Tolkein was a teacher, grading English exams, one of his students left a

page blank in the middle of the exam booklet. It was on that empty page that he first wrote, “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” It was encountering the empty page where he wasn't expecting one that allowed him to open up his imagination and to write a story that would turn into the beginning of one of the most popular literary series ever written.

Once you begin looking for empty places and empty things, you will discover that they are all around you. And they can be powerful, wonderful places. So often, that is not the case. Rather than looking at emptiness as a good thing, we often fear what is empty. We fear that we will get lost in empty places or not be able to fill them satisfactorily. We fear that to go to a place of emptiness is to be empty ourselves, and we are often afraid of what that implies. The feeling of emptiness is such a profoundly human emotion. It is the feeling we get when someone we love leaves us, it is the gaping hole in our hearts when a dear friend dies. It is the hollowness in our stomach when what we once knew to be true is taken away from us.

Emptiness follows us when we are hurt, when we grieve, when we are in pain, and when we struggle. Anyone who has ever felt empty and come out on the other side of it knows that emptiness is not the end. It can transform into something new, something healing and life-giving. It may never be the same, and we may always remember that empty feeling, but we are able to move beyond it. At its best, it becomes an invitation to enter a new place in our lives.

On Easter morning, we find God in the empty tomb. The emptiness first symbolizes the emptiness that Jesus' followers felt after his death, but God takes that place of sadness and pain and demonstrates to the Mary's that emptiness can also be a thing of joy and wonder. By encountering an empty tomb, their reality is turned on its head. They are offered a new kind of truth—one that would change their lives forever. Jesus' resurrection turns everything we know upside down, and it leaves us asking new questions. It turns the idea of emptiness from a thing to be feared to a thing to rejoice in.

Easter is a celebration of emptiness. We say “Alleluia!” at the empty tomb, and in encountering it, year after year, we are reminded that as hard and scary as it can be, emptiness holds promise. It is

holds hope.

On Easter morning, this day full of life and joyfulness, many of us come with feelings of emptiness inside of us. Many of us relate all too well to the feelings of fear and doubt that the disciples felt on that first morning. Our Easter task is to walk with them inside the empty tomb, to courageously face it for ourselves, with the hope that God will be there waiting for us. With the hope that God will have a message of love and new life for us. With the hope that even if “The Answer” is not immediately revealed, that presence and that love will be enough to help us move forward into a new day. On Easter morning, when you hear step into the story of the empty tomb, the question is not “Is it true?” but the question is “Where will you go from here?”

When the women stepped into the empty tomb, it was only then that they could begin to imagine how they might move away from the horrible violence of the cross and into a place of new life and renewed purpose. It is only then that they could begin to feel that even after death, Jesus would be with them. But, first they have to approach the emptiness of the tomb before they can meet Jesus again and before they can begin to move forward.

It is counterintuitive but it is the truth of Easter morning: you have to be able to face the empty tomb to find new life.

Easter Sunday is not a holiday for people who have all the answers. It is a day for us to bring our questions and to courageously begin to find our own truth. To approach the empty tomb and to begin to imagine how it might be the beginning of a new story, a new chapter. How that one moment two thousand years ago might have given birth to a whole new era of the world. How that one moment could continue to move us today.

So, I'm sorry if you came here this morning asking, “Is it true? Is this story really true?” I don't have that answer for you. It's not because there isn't one, or that there isn't a hundred answers. It's because the story is still unfolding. On Easter morning our questions are poised, but we have to stick around if we want to find the answers for ourselves—or if we want to follow the disciples and see what

answers they discovered in the days and weeks to come. The Good News of Christ's resurrection is that life is not over, death has not won. There is still much life to be created, there are still disciples to be made, stories to be told, and churches to be build. The Good News of this Easter morning is that God is in the emptiness. God is waiting for us in the empty tomb, ready to transform it into something new, ready to transform us for a new season of life. Alleluia!