

"Filling the Emptiness"

On the first Easter morning, the good news was nearly choked off because of a death grip. Let me repeat that, so the reality of it has a chance to sink in. The good news of the resurrection was caught in the hold of death, so much so the hope of it was nearly silenced forever. We know what a death grip is, right? It's the involuntary physical and emotional reaction our bodies have to a sudden perceived danger. It's happened to all of us. I've experienced it a few times in my life, and most often when I've just avoided a close call while driving the car. It's the result of a close call. It happens like this. I experience either a hard slide on the ice or a near miss in hitting something and my hands grip the steering wheel so tightly it feels as if they have to be pried off in order to be set free. That's a death grip. As Mark's Gospel tells it, the good news of Jesus' resurrection was, at first, tightly held in the grip of death. Why? What was going on? First of all, what happened that morning was nothing like what's happening this morning. There were no lillies or spring flowers. No one gathered in a nicely appointed sanctuary to worship God. No one made reservations for brunch or cooked up a special family meal. They certainly didn't gather to sing, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." No, as Mark's Gospel tells it, the women who came to the tomb had just bought spices to perform the ritual preparations for of a body that had died. The whole scene, including the hearts of the women who came to the tomb, was firmly held by the reality of death. The women were in a graveyard, after all, and though Mark tells us the early morning sun had just lifted above the horizon, the darkness of death's shadow was everywhere. It was only a few days earlier the two women named Mary, along with another woman, Salome, had watched from a distance as Jesus hung on the cross and breathed his last. They, and others who were his disciples, had watched what had taken place that week before. They remembered how Jesus was hailed as a hero when he rode into the city of Jerusalem. They were nearby when he was arrested, found guilty of insurrection, called before the Roman authority, tortured, and then hung to die on the cross. The suffering Jesus endured was intense and the weight of the death he bore nearly beyond comprehension. It's no wonder the grip of death and the darkness of crucifixion permeated the place that Sunday morning. You don't easily forget that kind of loss. You can't shake off that kind of grief. Yes, death had its hold on the women as they came looking for the body of Jesus.

This is our Easter morning. The beauty of this place and the celebration of our Easter traditions tell us that something extraordinary has happened. We're here to lift up the good news that Christ is risen but to do that the deeper story of what happened that first Easter must be given the opportunity to speak to us. The women's Easter morning began in the grip of death. And so, at least for a moment, let's allow ourselves to be in touch with the reality of our lives that can grip us in such a way as to potentially cancel out what Christ has done. It's in our darkness that heaven's light shines. It's our emptiness that is filled with the presence of a living Lord.

The place was the neonatal unit of a Children's Hospital. The baby was very ill, with multiple complications and not expected to live. The parents, a few close relatives, and myself were dressed in sterile gowns. Our faces were covered with cloth masks, but that couldn't hide the emotions we all were feeling. The pain in our eyes was obvious. As we stood around the crib, none of us said a word. I was the family's pastor and I felt like it was my duty to say something but I couldn't find the words to speak. What is one to say in the midst of an experience like that? We weren't able to reflect on it at the time but now I know the grief we felt had brought all of us to a place of deep silence. Then, one of the parents asked if the baby could be baptized. In that moment, I knew that our faith was giving us words to say. Water touched the head of the baby and the words came. "You are a precious child of God. You are baptized in the name of God, our creator. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. And, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who is our peace and our comfort, now and always."

The first Easter began in a death grip but the good news could not be silenced. As the woman stood in the shadows of the tomb the words came. "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus...He has been raised; he is not here...he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him..." Every Easter morning since that first one, the message of God releases us from the grip of death and sends us into the world to live, not only for Christ, but with Christ. Our Easter morning looks so very different from what happened long ago, with the flowers and the songs and the gathering of the Church. But there is something profoundly similar between now and then. In the way the women stood in the shadows of the tomb, the reality of grief can grip us. This happens in both large and smaller ways. It might be experiences like what took place in that hospital room or lesser things, like a struggling relationship or a job that isn't going well or a disappointment that leaves us frustrated or worried. The emptiness of these experiences is like a mini death and when they take hold of us the word of what God has done in Christ comes to our ears. He is risen. He is not here. This place of death, this place of emptiness, this place of loss, this place of

anxious worry and fear, it can not hold him and it can not hold us. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. Go and there you will see him.

The last words of Mark's Gospel say the women fled from the tomb in fear and silence. It's not a very uplifting ending. I wholeheartedly agree, if it were, in fact, an ending. You see, that's exactly why the Easter message is such good news. The women responded in fear and silence, as if to say death had won. If you tune out too quickly you might assume that all they had left were the shadows of a empty tomb, but the gospel wants us to hear that the story continues. It isn't the end. Go to Galilee and there you will see him. Galilee is our world. Galilee is our lives. Galilee is where we share love. We appreciate the songs and words and traditions that are part of our morning in this sanctuary but it's in our lives, our Galilee, that we will see him and know him and experience the life he offers.

This past week a family connected to our congregation gathered in this very room for a memorial service. Their family member had been a husband, father and grandfather and he died following a long battle with Alzheimer's Disease. One of the grandsons shared a song, playing guitar and singing the simple words of this hymn of faith. This is what he sang:

*In our end in our beginning, in our time infinity;
In our doubt is our believing, in our life eternity.
In our death a resurrection and the last a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

The song is beautiful and it has it almost right. It's not something only God can see. Today, Easter morning, our eyes are opened. We see it, too. Death and darkness and emptiness may hold us for a time but we're set free from death's grip. We've come to this sanctuary today for the purpose of going into the world where we encounter Christ in the midst of our lives. Mark's Gospel knows, the end is our beginning. And we know, because he lives we will live also.

On this Easter morning you've come to hear some word about Jesus. The gospel message sends us from here into the world. Go, and search for Jesus in the world. Go, and look for him. Go, and be aware of his presence. Go, and respond to him, not only in what you say you believe but in the way that you live.

Thanks be to God for the eternal blessing that is our faith.