

Empty Cross, Empty Tomb, Empty Church: Easter Sunday
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NPMC – April 4, 2021

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9; Mark 16:1-8
Hymns: StS 89/VT 565 – Christ Is Alive

Isaiah 25:6-9 (NRSV):

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
⁸ he will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
⁹ It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV):

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ But he said to 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. ⁷ But 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.” ⁸ 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.

There is a hill in northern Lithuania covered with over one hundred thousand crosses. Some are old and weathered, some shiny and new, of all different shapes and sizes, lying in piles or standing, forest-like, bristling against the sky. Known as the Hill of Crosses, this has become a holy place for Lithuanians. It is said that during the Soviet

occupation, the regime tried several times to clear this hill of crosses, to discourage such an open display of Christian devotion. But each time, the local people, in peaceful



but powerful
resistance,
would bring
their crosses
and fill it
back up

again.¹ Because of this, the Hill of Crosses has come to represent peace, hope, and unshakeable faith for Lithuanians and many others.

But how did the cross come to symbolize peace and hope? This past week, on Palm/Passion Sunday and on Good Friday, we have recounted the events that led up to the cross. It's not a happy story, but one of betrayal, violence, political corruption, humiliation, and grief. And yet, we find peace in the cross. How did we get here? This Easter morning, as we commemorate the women's early-morning arrival at the tomb, their footsteps still heavy with the grief of losing their teacher and friend, we remember their surprise at finding the tomb empty. Because of that emptiness, we are filled with joy as we celebrate Easter thousands of years later. It may sound a bit strange, but there is a sense in which Easter is a celebration of emptiness, in which emptiness is the key to Easter's power. I want to speak this morning about three aspects of this emptiness that make it celebration-worthy: the empty cross, the empty tomb, and the empty church.

¹ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7duefb6Khw&ab_channel=NationalGeographic. Photo above by Marcin Szala, Wikimedia Commons.

1. Empty Cross

Before the events of Easter morning, there is another emptying that is worth noting: the empty cross. We may not notice it a lot, but the crosses that we have in our sanctuary are empty, with no figure of the suffering Jesus upon them. In the Christian tradition, the empty cross represents resurrection: it is the Easter cross that has been emptied of its terror and suffering.

But remember that the cross did not become empty on its own. It seems like a minor footnote in the Passion story, but all four Gospels recount that after Jesus had died, a member of the Jewish council, Joseph of Arimathea, made a request to Pilate for the body of Jesus. Mark tells us that he “went boldly to Pilate” to ask for Jesus’ body (15:43), a risky action that would have outed him as an associate of Jesus’ – the one



just crucified as a traitor to Rome. This was also notable because the bodies of victims of crucifixion were often simply left on the crosses, because those close to them considered it too dangerous to claim the bodies for proper burial. But Joseph here takes the risk: he petitions Pilate for Jesus’ body, and he takes it down from the cross, and cares for it and gives it a proper burial

and resting place, according to their Jewish traditions.²

² Painting above: “Station 13: Jesus Is Taken Down from the Cross,” by Jen Norton.

As I mentioned, this may seem minor to us, but several theologians have picked up on the profound nature of this emptying of the cross. African-American theologian James Cone has connected the cross with different kinds of suffering experienced by people today, so that the cross is not a one-time event, but something ongoing. For Cone, people continue to be crucified today and in recent history, such as in the lynching of Black people in the early twentieth century and the overrepresentation of African Americans on death row in his country today. In light of those ongoing crucifixions, Cone says, the cross calls us to “solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.” And in the emptying of the cross that we read about in the Bible, “[w]e are faced with a clear challenge: ‘to take the crucified down from the cross.’”³ In whatever way we are able, we are called to help alleviate the suffering of our fellow human beings; we are called, like Joseph, to take the crucified people down from the crosses upon which they are suffering. Within this theology, the empty cross becomes “a symbol of God’s continuous empowerment,” says womanist theologian JoAnne Marie Terrell.⁴ Emptied of its victims, the cross becomes powerless to inflict suffering and terror; it represents coming out the other side, surviving and healing from suffering.

In this way, the emptied cross participates in Isaiah’s vision that: “God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of [God’s] people [God] will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 25:8).

2. Empty Tomb

³ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 160-162.

⁴ JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in African-American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 125.

That brings us once again to Easter morning, and the surprise and confusion of the women who had come to anoint Jesus' body – their last act of love and care for their friend. In the original, abrupt ending of Mark's Gospel, we get a sense of just how unexpected, even shocking, it was for them to find the tomb empty. But the whole passage is full of bizarre contradictions. For one thing, the women set out that morning on an impossible task: to anoint a body that has been entombed behind a huge stone that they are unable to move on their own. Even on their way there, they are wondering how this will even work, or who will help them with the stone. But notice that they go anyway. And when they arrive at the tomb, they find that they had been concerned about the wrong thing. The stone was not an obstacle to their anointing the body; rather, the body was nowhere to be found. Mark is notable compared to the other Gospels in that he leaves the women with nothing but the emptiness of the tomb. There is no risen Jesus there to greet them, or call them warmly by name. Mark lingers with the women in the empty tomb, emphasizing the shock of that moment. He leaves them with emptiness that renders them speechless: "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" (16:8). That's where Mark originally ends; in a swirl of confusion and fear at the emptiness of the tomb.



So what does this empty tomb mean? Like the empty cross, it has not become empty on its own, but has been emptied. In taking on the fullness of human

mortality, God has undone the power of death and of the tomb. Death can no longer separate us from God because God has experienced it, journeyed through it, and in doing so, overcome it. The life-giving power of God has been revealed in resurrection, in the tomb that has become a womb and given birth to new life. So the One who was tortured and murdered has been raised; God's peace has been proven stronger than death, even violent death on a cross. In this way, the empty tomb becomes another sign of Isaiah's vision: "And [God] will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; [God] will swallow up death forever" (v. 7-8).

Notice, though, as I mentioned, that Mark leaves the women – and us – without any evidence of or encounter with the risen Jesus. They are simply told that Jesus "has gone ahead of them to Galilee." With those words, the emptiness of the tomb becomes an invitation. In his absence, Jesus calls the women to discipleship, to follow him into Galilee to pick up his ministry of peace and justice where he left off. By ending the story in the middle of things, Mark extends this invitation to us, too: we are also invited to follow the Risen One, to witness to this transformative emptiness. We know the women will go on to witness and preach about what they've seen (how else could we know this story?), but by pausing the story here, Mark makes it seem as if the women are waiting for us to go with them. The resurrection road from the empty tomb to Galilee is our path, too.

3. Empty Church

At first glance, it may not seem that this kind of emptiness fits with the other two. The empty cross and empty tomb represent the undoing of things that oppress us,

suffering and death. The emptiness of our church over this past year has been something painful, a separation that we continue to grieve. And yet I see in our empty church something worth celebrating. Our willingness to give up our regular church life for the past year is above all a sign of care for one another. It is a recognition that we value each other's lives as sacred and are willing to make sacrifices to protect one another and keep each other safe. Our willingness to limit our numbers, adapt to online worship, and give up something very dear to us – congregational singing – for this very long year may be the reason some of us are still here. And our unequivocal agreement that those sacrifices are worth it is in itself worth celebrating.

As we celebrate another distanced Easter, I recognize the resilience, the patience and perseverance, of our faith family. Look how far we've come! And we're still here. Last year, our church building was deserted at Easter. This year, some of us are able to gather in the sanctuary, but there are still so many empty pews, so many voices missing. And yet we continue to wait in hope, knowing that this time of distance will not



last forever. We wait with Isaiah for God's vision of peace and wholeness to become reality: "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for

whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (v. 6, 9).⁵

We know our waiting is not yet over. Like the women at the end of Mark’s Gospel, we are still in the middle of things; we haven’t yet seen the risen Christ face to face. And yet, we have signs of hope as we wait. This afternoon, we will have a taste of that communal feast that Isaiah dreams about in our virtual Paska Fasma potluck. As we have a taste of this feast and of the joy of gathering together, may Isaiah’s vision remain in our hearts, encompassing the promises of the emptied cross (an end to suffering) and an emptied tomb (an end to death and division). May we, like the women that first Easter morning, set out to do what seems impossible, and despite our fears, accept the invitation of the Risen One to continue on the way to Galilee. May we celebrate the emptiness this Easter, marvelling at the mysterious peace and comfort it offers us. In the words of Jan Richardson, “You had not imagined / that something so empty / could fill you / to overflowing.”⁶

Hallelujah, Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed!

⁵ Collage above: “The Best Supper,” by Jan Richardson, <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/10/03/the-best-supper/>

⁶ Jan Richardson, “Seen: A Blessing for Easter Day,” available from: <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/04/06/easter-sunday-seen/>