

Inside the Empty Tomb

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Preaching on:

Luke 24:1–12

When I handed out little red Easter eggs to all the kids during the children's sermon, Luke said, "Wait a minute, is there anything inside this egg?" And I said, "No, it's empty." How did that make you feel, Luke?

It's a little bit disappointing when you think that something is going to be there, and you open it up and it's empty. I've always sort of felt the same way about the Easter morning story and that empty tomb. In fact, if you gave me just a little bit of information about Christianity, and I wasn't a minister and I'd never heard the story before, and you say

"Well, someone comes to Earth named Jesus. He's the Messiah. Son of God. God incarnate. He does all sorts of wonderful things, but then his people reject him and he goes on trial. It's a sham trial, and they convict him and they crucify him and he dies. But then he comes back to life." And I was going to rewrite that story.

I don't think I'd put an empty tomb in it anywhere. I think it would be something like this: Jesus is up there on the cross, and he dies, and the Roman centurion looks out at the crowd and says, "He's dead." And then Jesus's head rises up, and the sun breaks out of the clouds, and the earth begins to tremble. And the nails go shooting out of his arms and feet, and he levitates off the cross and says "I was dead. But now I am resurrected." And the angels pop out of the sky and everybody sees what Easter is really all about out.

Or maybe if you wanted to give it a little more time, you could have Jesus go in the tomb so everybody knows that he's really good and dead, but then when the women go to the tomb, instead of just finding an empty, open tomb, maybe the stone is still in front of the tomb, and when they get to it, they say, "How will we ever roll the stone away to get to his body?" And at that moment, boom, the stone explodes in a giant fireball. And as the smoke disappears, Jesus walks through the smoke and says, "I am risen." And he flies up into the sky. Well, that would really show people, wouldn't it?

I don't think if I were going to rewrite this story, that I would put an empty tomb anywhere near it, but that's what God does. God chooses an empty tomb, with all the fear and confusion and downright ambiguity that you find in there. God could have proven resurrection to the world, but instead God chooses the empty tomb, and I wonder why. Why? I think that maybe the empty tomb... More than any other scenario that we could possibly imagine, the empty tomb is the crucible where real faith, true faith, is formed.

Now it makes sense, doesn't it? It makes sense that God would choose, or prefer, faith over certainty. Of course God prefers faith over certainty, but you and me, we'd prefer a little... We'd appreciate it, just a little bit of certainty some of the time, something that we can just cling to and know, yes, this is the way it works. This is the promise. And there's not a doubt in the sky, not anywhere. But God chooses faith.

I think that there's something essentially human about faith and that's why God chooses

it for us. There's something about who we are as creatures, created creatures. We need faith. There is so much that we could do as human beings when we get together, right? There's almost nothing that we can't achieve. We can send people to the moon, and to Mars, and beyond. We can come up with vaccines in just a few months that save millions and millions of lives. We can found universities and think tanks that come up with all kinds of amazing ideas. We have the Hubble telescope, and now the James Webb telescope, peering to the very beginning of creation. What is there that we can't achieve? If there is a limit to what we, as human beings can know or can accomplish, we haven't come anywhere close to that limit yet.

But you and me, as individual people, as individual beings in our own little slices of experience, we don't know it all. We don't always know which way to go when it comes to our lives, the purpose of our lives, the meaning of our lives, what we're doing, the relationships that we're in, are we supposed to go left or right, should I go forward or back? What's the right thing to do? What's the thing that's going to make me happy? What's the thing that's going to save my marriage? What's the thing that's going to make my name? We don't know all the answers. We never know all the answers. And somehow we have to get through that.

Without the opportunity to act and to work on faith, and to hope beyond hope, and to persevere, we cease to be psychologically and spiritually healthy human beings. We need faith, in some ways more than we need certainty. We cease to be human without it. We've all met someone who knows everything. My wife, Bonnie, can attest to that. She's definitely met somebody who thinks he knows everything. But we've all met somebody who thinks that they know everything. And in fact, as we've all been glued to the news cycle lately, we've been hearing all of these analysts and policy experts talking about Putin, about how he is a person who has surrounded himself only with certainty. And if you're going to succeed in his circle and in his service, you can only affirm his worldview and you have to hide all of the bad news from him so that this war in Ukraine is really a war about Putin's false sense of certainty, the certainty that he has amassed around himself without any doubt.

But the people of Ukraine, are they living by certainty right now, or for the last six or seven weeks? Have they been sure that they were going to be victorious? Have they been absolutely sure that they were going to survive? No, the people of Ukraine are fighting and surviving, if they are fighting and surviving, by faith alone. We've all met

somebody who thinks that they know and everything. And we've all seen people who a long time ago should have laid down and just given up. And yet they continue to stand up and fight, despite the odds, despite the circumstances, and despite the evidence stacked against them.

Now God forbid that you and I should ever be without a little bit of that kind of faith. We need it. And we need the doubt, don't we? We need the doubt that by definition must come alongside that kind of faith. Doubt is the waiting room of faith, just like the empty tomb is the entryway into Easter. God chooses as the very first experience of the Easter faith, not proof and not certainty, not some public televised event, but an empty tomb, and all the fear, and all the doubt, and all the loss and confusion and disbelief and idle talk. And the possibility in the empty tomb, the possibility of something so new, and so amazing, something so wonderful that it cannot be contained by certainty. It can only be pointed to by faith.

You cannot be a psychologically and spiritually healthy human being if you only believe in and work for the sure thing, because not everything in life is the sure thing, and if you convince yourself that it is, you're going to head down the wrong path. For the biggest questions in life, for the greatest challenges of life, we must learn how to let the possibility of hope glimmer to us, shine out, sparkle, just a little bit, amidst the loss and the chaos of this world. We must let the empty tomb speak to us. We have to know how to sit inside the empty tomb. It's not an accident. It's not just bad timing that Jesus slipped away before the women arrived at that tomb. We need the empty tomb.

Life is not a journey from one certainty to another certainty, to another certainty, to another certainty, is it? Life is a series of complicated and often painful transitions, even when it's a transition into good news. Progress in our lives requires that we don't run away from transition. Faith, not certainty, is what gives us the strength to persevere through transition.

Beloved, Christ is risen, and isn't the sight of him standing there amongst us again, alive and well, a little worse for the wear, but beautiful and resurrected, just a wonderful sight? It is. Hallelujah. Yes. But do not forget the empty tomb. Don't skip early Easter morning. The empty tomb is where a faith stronger than certainty is born again and again and again.