

**“Because the tomb is empty. . .”**

John 20:1-7

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Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas

***“The important thing is that the tomb is empty!”***

When I was a parish assistant and then an associate pastor, I longed to preach on Easter Sunday. I wanted to stand up and witness to the Resurrection on this most glorious of Sundays, with all the hoopla and the flowers and the fullest of choirs---with standing room only! I sat in the liturgist’s chair six consecutive Easter Sundays with that longing in my heart, wondering if and when the day would come.

That day is here now and I am no longer filled with longing. I am filled with other emotions. I have been surprised to find fear and trembling are near the top of the list. I even had what I call a “pulpit nightmare” early Saturday morning. If you want to know more about that, you’ll have to make an appointment.

Because now that I am “the one” in the pulpit, I realize Easter is not the easiest time to preach. The grass is not as green as I had imagined it would be, when I sat in the liturgist chair. What I have learned, as I moved from that chair to this one, is that Easter Sunday is probably the toughest Sunday of the year to preach.

On Easter Sunday, most everyone comes to church with high expectations---there should be perfect prayers, magnificent music, a stellar sermon. People also have expectations that have little to do with worship: their children will behave beautifully; tensions between family members will be quelled. Everyone will be “one happy family”, at least on this one Sunday of the year.

People not only have expectations about the service, they have expectations for their spiritual *experience during the service*. People want to believe, especially on Easter Sunday. People want to experience the Risen Christ. They want their doubts to disappear. Dressed in their Easter best, people expect---even demand---certainty.

But certainty is the last thing we find in the gospels. All four gospels tell the Resurrection story, but they tell us nothing of certainty. Speaking of Easter, the gospels spell out fear, confusion, doubt. No certainty.<sup>1</sup>

If you allow yourself to look past the glorious spring weather (and yes, the rain IS glorious!), the cute pastel Easter outfits, the wonderful chocolates, you will see Easter has a way of raising up some sobering questions. Questions about what happened long ago and even questions about what has happened recently in our lives. Where are our loved ones who have died? Do they know it's Easter? What really happened at that tomb so long ago? Is He alive? Or was his body merely stolen? We want to know. **Really know.**

The quest for certainty continues to this very day, and it takes many forms. Nearly a year ago I was on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. We spent our first week in the hill country of Galilee, and our second week in Jerusalem.

One of the very first places we visited in Jerusalem was a place called the Garden Tomb. It is a beautiful garden situated inside the Old City. Early in the morning we were escorted to this walled, secluded garden. There we heard a story that would be re-told several times in several sacred locations over the next several days.

It was a story that could have been titled, “**Where Did Jesus Do?**” Where did Jesus share the Last Supper? Where did he die? Where was he buried?

Beginning around the third century, Christians staked claims on various spots in the Holy Land, deciding (sometimes arbitrarily) these were the actual locations of key gospel events. Later on, different groups of Christians began to have turf wars over these “traditional” holy sites. Sadly, there has been a history of violence over which church has rights to which sites, violence between Christians that continues even today. The quest for certainty adds fuel to the fire of these turf wars.

The Garden Tomb we visited was **not** the *traditional* site where Jesus is thought to have been buried. That site is inside an enormous basilica, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Control of the basilica is shared between Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic groups. Because of all the infighting, centuries ago the keys to the basilica were given to two Muslim families, whose descendants continue to lock and unlock the great doors each day. Ironic, isn't it, that Muslims hold the keys to this most holy Christian site?

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Kraftchick, “The Demands of Resurrection” in Insights, The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary, Resurrection, Fall 2007, p. 17.

The Garden Tomb we visited was once owned by someone wealthy, someone who could have been the Joseph of Arimathea mentioned in the gospel of John (John 19:38). It has a rolling stone entrance; it is the only ancient tomb in the area with this kind of entrance. The tomb was carved out of the stony hillside. And there is a large weeping chamber. This, we were told, is how we know the owner of the grave was a rich man. Because the richer the man, the larger the wailing room. Our guide, a Brit whose name was (I kid you not) Mr. Terestreal awed us with his knowledge and his reverence for the place.

This Garden Tomb was one of the handful of places I experienced the Risen Christ on this pilgrimage. It was not at the ornate, imposing basilica, but in stooping to enter the empty stone tomb where I sensed Jesus' presence in a palpable way. It was not in glorious music or marvelous mosaics, nor in densely packed crowds of the faithful straining to touch a sacred relic where I sensed the reality of the Resurrection, but in the cool, quiet, hollowed out stone where indeed his broken feet might have lain.

The entrance was not very high. We had to crouch to file in. The space was small by today's standards. The wailing room could fit only four or five of us. Each one entered silent, hushed, and each one emerged from the darkness, some blinking back tears, some merely blinking in the bright morning sun.

We all felt changed a bit, amazed by the nearness of it and the mystery of it and its continuing power over all of us. Many of us felt open to the Lord in ways that surprised us. We were surprised by the power of the empty tomb.

We were amazed by a simple truth. Because the tomb is empty, there is hope. Because the tomb is empty, there is a future. Because the tomb is empty, we seek the living Lord elsewhere, even today.

In the way we think of certainty in the modern world, there is no certainty about the fact of Jesus' Resurrection. No one can prove it historically. But no one can disprove it, either. It is rather like those sacred sites people keep fighting over. Was this the place? Is this actually where it all happened? And yet as Mr. Terestreal reminded us, "The important thing is not that this is or is not the exact place. The important thing is that the tomb is empty!"

I think perhaps we have been seeking the wrong thing. We've been seeking answers, yet He replies only with silence. We've been seeking clarity, yet He gives us mystery. We've been seeking certainty, yet He longs for us to seek only Him. Because the tomb is empty, we are different. We are changed.

It is in change, in transformation, in encounter with unexpected grace and unearned love, where we find Him, where we realize **He is alive**. Where we realize the tomb really is empty. This is how we know.

During Holy week one Lutheran congregation in the South Bronx outside New York City decided to reenact the whole grand thing, from Palm Sunday to Easter. They began by dramatizing Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. They borrowed a live donkey and paraded around the block of shabby storefronts and run-down apartments shouting, "Hosanna!" When they got back to the door of the church, the Palm Sunday procession ran into a street demonstration protesting police brutality. There was Jesus and the protesters, the congregation and the street crowds, the cries of "Hosanna!" and the cries of social outrage mingled together. Someone even called the police, seeing the commotion.

They managed to make it inside their church, where Jesus was tried, condemned, and executed. Then, silence. Then the amazing word of the empty tomb. Then, fear and doubt. *"They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."*

Is He alive or is it a cruel trick? Three members of the congregation were to stand up and bear witness. "I know that He is alive," each one was to begin.

The first was Angie. "I know that He is alive," she said, "because he is alive in me." She then told of her own abuse, of her despair and of her alcoholism. But then she explained how the church welcomed her. She started attending worship, then Bible study, and step by step Angie rose from the grave that had been her life.

The two other assigned witnesses spoke in turn, and it was time to move on. But the testimony did not stop. Others in the sanctuary began to rise spontaneously. "I know that he is alive," they said, "because he is alive in me." Homeless people, addicts now clean, the least and the lost, stood one by one. Nothing could stop them.<sup>2</sup>

Because the tomb is empty, we know he is alive. Even those of us with lovely homes and important careers and proud accomplishments, even those of us who revel in our intellect and our self-sufficiency. . . *we need to know* the tomb is empty.

Even those of us who hide our pain (which is nearly all of us). . . those of us who go around helping others, we know deep down we, too, are least and lost.

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<sup>2</sup> Story recounted in Thomas G. Long, *Testimony, Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, pp. 30-31.

Though we surely will never fight over which site is the holiest, we find ourselves embroiled in useless arguments and fruitless turf wars. We fight about things that really aren't central to our belief. We are estranged from those we love; we are even estranged from ourselves.

All of us are lost, one way or another. All of us need to experience the empty tomb, one way or another. Let's stoop down, peer in, touch that pale white stone. In the stooping we may find our belief deepened in powerful and unexpected ways. Let's finish the sentence, "I know He is alive. . ." with the words, "because he is alive in me." We, too, may find life in the uncertainty of an empty tomb and in the uncertainty of our lives. We too, may find hope because the tomb is empty.

And when we do, nothing will stop us.

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