

Easter Sunday Yr. B 2009
Texts: Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
John 20:1-18

The tomb is empty.

Never in the history of the world has one day so profoundly changed how we live, how we die, and how we understand the world.

Never in the history of the world has such an ignominious end been such an amazingly glorious beginning.

We have the advantage of hindsight, of looking back on that first Easter's events knowing what is unfolding. Poor Mary, poor Peter and the Beloved disciple, they didn't know, how could they?

All they knew was that the worst week of their lives left them gripped by grief and disbelief; that the one they followed, the one they gave their lives to, the one who gave his life for them, was killed for no reason, crucified for political expediency. And there was nothing they could do about it.

Somehow they would have to accept this and move on. They didn't know how they could possibly do this. Life would have to go on as it did before they met Jesus and followed him. Life would somehow have to get back to "normal" whatever that meant.

As if things couldn't get any worse, to top off the pain and grief and despair, as Mary approaches the tomb and sees the stone rolled away, she is sure someone has stolen Jesus' body. Grave robbing was very common in those days and this would have been a very understandable conclusion to come to.

Can't you just imagine Mary's crushing grief? Can't you just imagine her thinking as she approaches the empty tomb, "Oh, my God! What else can we go through? What else could make things worse than they are?" and then finding out that the final insult, the last straw, was that Jesus' body was gone.

Mary rushes to Peter and the Beloved disciple and with her heart breaking more than she ever thought possible tells them the terrible news, “they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him.” Running to the tomb the beloved disciple and Peter find out that what she has said is correct, the body is gone. What could they do? Nothing. So they return home and leave Mary at the empty tomb weeping inconsolably.

Trying to get closer to the Lord she loves, Mary enters the tomb and is met by two angels. “Woman, why are you weeping?” Although she answers them, she couldn’t help but think, “why do you think I am weeping? We are in a tomb, and the one thing that should be in the tomb isn’t here.”

Turning to leave she encounters a figure that asks her the same question, “Woman, why are you weeping?” and then “whom are you looking for?” We know this figure is Jesus, but Mary, whether from her grief or the darkness of very early morning, doesn’t realize who it is.

Believing Jesus to be the gardener and knowing what has become of the body she pleads with him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” In other words, “if putting Jesus here has been an inconvenience let me know. I will take care of him. I will take him off your hands.”

And then, in one of the most tender and intimate scenes in scripture, Jesus says one word, “Mary” and in that instant she knows the tomb truly was empty, that her Lord lives and that she has truly seen him.

Ever since the Enlightenment we have tried to explain away this event. We have tried to make sense out of it. The resurrection has been explained as a grave robbing, with the disciples too embarrassed to admit that not only had they failed Jesus by denying and betraying him, they couldn’t even keep his dead body safe. Or, that it was the disciples that took the body so as to embarrass Pilate.

The argument has been made that Jesus wasn’t really dead, greatly weakened from his ordeal perhaps, but that he was resuscitated or

revived and this is what the disciples experienced. But these explanations make no sense.

If the disciples were too embarrassed by their behavior, why then were all their failings recorded? If they were so ashamed of themselves why didn't the story end differently? Why didn't they tell the world how great they were, how faithful they were? Why? Because they realized that it wasn't about them at all, it was all about Jesus!

The argument that Jesus was simply revived doesn't make sense either. Here is a man who was whipped, beaten, pierced with a spear, who had his hands and feet impaled by stakes and he just gets up a few days later, has the strength to roll the stone away from the opening of the tomb, from the inside no less, and walks away.

Why would we worship a man who stays dead? Why would we worship as divine someone who just happens to heal more quickly than the rest of us? Trying to make sense out of the resurrection doesn't make sense.

It doesn't make sense because the message of Easter isn't about resuscitation. It isn't about grave robbing or being so embarrassed that you have to make up a fanciful story to cover yourself and your cause.

The message of Easter is that the tomb is empty. The message of Easter is that Christ is raised from the dead. The tomb could not hold Jesus and as a result, it cannot hold us.

Sometimes we try so hard to make sense out of something, we try so hard to "get it," that we miss the point entirely. Sometimes the simplest explanation is the hardest to grasp and it takes the simplest among us to show us the truth.

Harry Pritchett, an Episcopal priest tells the story of a young boy in his first parish. Danny was about 10 and had Down Syndrome. He was in a Sunday School class with all the other ten year olds of the church. The Sunday School class was given an assignment to find signs of new life and to bring them to class the next Sunday, which was Easter.

In the 70's when this occurred, there was a type of pantyhose that came packaged in a large white egg and were called L'eggs. Each child was

given a L'egg egg in which to put their sign of new life. On Easter morning at the children's sermon all the children gathered up front and all their L'egg's were put into a large basket. Fr. Pritchett would take out each egg and open it and the child who brought it would excitedly tell why they chose what they did to fill the egg. There were blades of new grass, pieces of chocolate, small flowers, some stones to signify the stone in front of the tomb. There was even a yellow marshmallow peep put into a L'egg.

Father Pritchett lifted the last L'egg out of the basket and opened it. There was nothing inside. All the kids started laughing, "That has to be Danny's egg." "Danny never understands anything."

Danny very proudly says, "its empty!" His teacher replies, "yes Danny, we know, your egg is empty."

"No!" Danny exclaims. "No!" "Not the egg, the tomb! The tomb is empty!"

Danny, the boy who never understood anything, was the only one to understand the simplest and most profound truth. Danny "got it."

This is not the end of the story, however, it is really only the beginning. Danny, like so many children with Down Syndrome had other medical problems as well, including a heart defect.

About six weeks after Easter, Danny died. At his memorial service all the children from his Sunday School class processed up the aisle and without a word laid empty plastic pantyhose containers on the altar.

The Tomb is empty. Christ is risen. Alleluia!

