

Easter Sunday April 20, 2014 John 20:1-18 Acts 10:34-43 “When Empty Is Full”

Years ago I heard some challenging words in a cemetery. The boy was in his early teens. His father had died in an automobile accident, and it just happened that the funeral was a few days before Easter. The funeral was very sad, of course because of the terrible loss, and because there were only a few persons in attendance since the family had only recently moved into the area, but even more because the family had no church affiliation. The kids had not been brought up in any faith; the only reason I was involved was because the father had been baptized in a Methodist church some 42 years before as an infant. The funeral director called me and asked me to conduct the grave-side funeral service.

I met with the wife and the daughter, the boy’s sister, before conducting the service, but the boy was not around. When I asked about him, his mother said that he was too upset, but the daughter broke in, “He hates God and refused to come here.”

At the funeral, the boy stood before his father’s grave and muttered, “Not so! I don’t believe a word of it! All lies!” every time I offered a scripture or said a prayer. The funeral director tried to get him to stop his angry comments, to no avail. So I tried to incorporate them, his feelings, into the service. I told God how broken-hearted and let down the man’s family felt, and how it seemed as though nothing made sense. I asked God to help us (*I needed help, too.*)

Something happened when I started trying to talk about the deceased man. I asked the family and few others who were standing there to add words about him. The son took that time to yell at his dead father, “Why didn’t you give us something to believe in? How could leave us so empty, with no hope?”

I wish that I could tell you that there was a wonderful, cathartic ending where the boy suddenly heard Jesus speaking *his* name and then saw that death is not the end and that God holds us in God’s everlasting arms whether we live or die. And, of course, that he became one of my very best church members... Didn’t happen.

So why tell you this downer of a story on Easter? Because we who are Christian have a responsibility to help others learn the story of Jesus – the story of God loving the world so much that God put everything on the line by coming into the world as a human being... In Jesus, God told us and showed us what matters in life: love God, love others; if you want to gain life, you have to be willing to let go of it for the sake of someone else... In Jesus, we have been promised that no matter how unloving we are, no matter how much we manage to mess up our lives, God will not turn his back on us. Instead, like the Father of the prodigal son (Luke 15), God will receive us with open arms and absolute forgiveness if we will just turn toward God or ask for help. And, very important: we who are Christian are asked to help others know what Jesus’ voice - full of love, challenge, acceptance and forgiveness - sounds like.

The first Easter began as a day of despair for Mary of Magdalene, and then it got worse! Still reeling from the horror and grief of Jesus’ death, Mary had taken the spices customarily used for

anointing the dead to do the only thing she had left to do for Jesus. But when she arrived at his tomb, she faced a new horror: the grave had been tampered with, the stone had been rolled away. We know the Easter story too well for this part of it to have as much impact on us as it must have had on Mary, but if you can imagine going to the grave of someone you love, and discovering that somebody has in some way moved, knocked over, or defaced the stone on the grave, you may touch the despair of Mary Magdalene that morning. Wasn't it enough that they had mocked him and killed him? Was the mockery to continue even after he was dead?

Immediately Mary ran to get Peter and another disciple. The two men went into the tomb and found it empty, and, Gospel-writer John tells us that the other disciple (probably John) "saw and believed." The two men left, went home. But Mary stood outside the tomb and wept. All she knew was the double loss of her beloved Jesus. (Pause)

At this point the cemetery conversation gets a little weird: First the two angels ask Mary, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and then Jesus, whom she does not recognize, asks her the same question, "Why are you weeping?"

What a question! Why *wouldn't* she be weeping? She has just witnessed the cruel death of her best friend. And now his grave's been messed with and his body is missing. Duh!

Throughout the Gospel of John, a big deal is made of those who are able to see and those who do not see the Light. The Light, of course, is Jesus as Messiah, the Son of God.

There at the cemetery, Mary did not see so well at first. She saw that Jesus' body was missing. Then she saw the man she assumed to be the gardener. She needed to know who had taken Jesus' body and where they put it, so she could get it back and take care of it. She was seeing only earthly things, sort of like us most of the time...

But then Jesus spoke her name: "Mary," and the scales fell away from her heart's eyes and she recognized him. Her Lord was alive and with her. She apparently reached out to grab him, because Jesus told her not to hold him. I've always been mystified by this instruction not to hold onto him.

Preacher/professor Anna Carter Florence offered a neat perspective on this, which I share now: 'Jesus literally says, "Stop holding onto me; stop clinging to me." See how fast it happens? You go from seeing resurrection to confessing your faith to grabbing onto it with both fists. And the next thing you know, the emphasis is shifting from my Lord to *my* Lord; mine!(In the church) we start to cling to it, to try to control it, to defend it, and measure people against it, until before you know it, we think we can judge what resurrection looks like. Before you know it, we aren't holding onto anything but the Jesus of our own expectations. ...He won't let us do it, will he? Don't hold onto me. Stop clinging to me. This is the first post-resurrection teaching: You can see the risen Christ, but you can't cling to him. You can confess your faith in Jesus, but you cannot own him..... Go and announce that he is risen, he is risen indeed!' (Anna Carter Florence, Good Preacher.com, 4/2011)

Do we hear Jesus call *our* names? We cannot own him, but we can listen for him. We pray and listen, read the Bible and listen, reach out to others and listen. We cannot hold him or manipulate him, but we must share him.

One person who was able to share faith and hope with another under adverse circumstances was a woman named Louise Degrafinried. The *New York Times* had an account of her experience. It happened near Mason, Tennessee, in 1984. One day Mrs. Degrafinried was on the phone with a friend in her modest house when her husband was accosted outside by a rough-looking man holding a gun. The man had escaped from the state prison and was on the run and very dangerous. When they came inside, Mrs. Degrafinried first told the man to put down his gun, that she was a Christian woman and would not allow violence in her home. He laid his shotgun on the couch. Mrs. Degrafinried looked at the man for a long moment, then said, "Are you hungry?" He looked at her as if she were crazy.

"What?"

"Are you hungry?" she asked again.

"Yeah, I am. Haven't eaten in three days."

"Well," she said, "come on into the kitchen and sit down. I'm gonna fix you some bacon and eggs. Before I do, though, I want you to get yourself right down that hall to the bathroom and wash your face and hands. Wash good. You look terrible." She had her husband get the man some dry socks and other clothes.

The escaped prisoner was dumbfounded. But he went down the hall to the bathroom. Mrs. Degrafinried got out eggs and bacon and began to cook him a meal.

When he had finished washing up, the man came back into the room, and she inspected him. "Well, you look a whole lot better." She talked to him as he ate. She told him about her little Baptist church and about Jesus and how he had come into her life and how it had made such a difference for her. She talked to him about how God loved everybody and didn't want any of his children breaking into people's houses and scaring the wits out of them. She asked him about his own family, and he told her that his father and mother were both dead. He told her she reminded him of his grandmother who had died when he was eight. And she told him more about the Lord Jesus.

Mrs. Degrafinried's friend had called the police when she had ended their phone conversation so unexpectedly. When the police approached the house, Mr. Degrafinried went out to meet them. The escaped prisoner, whose name was Riley, was worried that the police would hurt him. So Mrs. Degrafinried went out and told the police to let Riley finish his breakfast; then he would give himself up quietly. He was taken back to prison and given more time to serve. But the Degrafinrieds kept in touch with him, and Louise Degrafinried visited him in prison and prayed with him. She told Riley she claimed him as one of her own family. In 1988, Riley became a Christian. In 1995, he was freed from prison and later married and became a father. When Mrs. Degrafinried died in 1998, Riley Arzeneaux spoke at her funeral service, testifying how much

her faith in God had helped fill the emptiness of his life. (From an article in the *NY Times* (Feb. 21, 1984) and various websites)

For us as Christians, it all boils down to whether or not we can risk believing that Jesus is risen and is offering us new life and new freedom from life and death, even today. *And* whether or not we can accept the responsibility as Christians of letting the truth of God's power and love shine through the fabric of our lives. "They'll know we are Christians by our love," the song says. And that's just what Jesus asks us to do.

My prayer for the young man from years ago whose father died in the accident is that along the way, perhaps through one of you, he has heard God speak his name. Perhaps now, through all his pain and questions, his heart has come to know the God who knew him before he was even born.

On Friday, Good Friday, I sat in the pews here for three hours, trying to let Jesus' time on the Cross get a hold of me. All kinds of things passed through my mind, sometimes prayers, a lot of times wandering thoughts. At one point I noticed how off-center the communion table appeared from where I was sitting. It didn't look well-positioned at all. I got up and walked to the back and stood directly in line with the altar cross, though, and I saw that the table was actually properly positioned. This seemed to me to bear a message: when things seem out of kilter or proportion, put yourself in front of the Cross and realize that God's perspective is still just as true as it was when God created us, when God came into the world in the person of Jesus, when God laid down his heart for our sakes – allowing mockery and even death to appear to win – and then, when God opened that death-boasting tomb and brought forth new life and new possibilities. Whatever seems empty, hopeless, or defeated can be an opportunity for God to fill us with new life.

1 Corinthians 15:55 declares, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" We feel the sting of death, and each time someone we love dies the grave threatens to suffocate us with a harsh laugh of victory, just as was the case in Jesus' day. But the story is not finished, because Jesus Christ is alive, speaking the name of each one of us so as to let us know God's special love and power in our lives and even in, through and beyond our deaths.

Like all signs that point to something greater; the empty tomb is a sign of a power greater than human power, a power greater than death itself. It is a power that assures us that God has the last word and that God's word is this: "I have come that you might have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10).

May this Easter help you to fully live the life God has given you, free from fear, forgiven all guilt, and always remembering: the tomb is empty, that your life may be full. Because he lives, so can we. In the name of our Risen Lord Jesus, thank God! Amen.