

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Resurrection of Our Lord • April 12, 2020

Jeremiah 31:1-6 • Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 • Colossians 3:1-4 • John 20:1-18

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which sits in the Old City of Jerusalem, is one of the holiest sites in Christianity. The church itself was built in the fourth century under Emperor Constantine on the site where Jesus was believed to have been crucified, buried, and resurrected. The site draws scores of pilgrims who want to see for themselves the empty tomb, the place where the resurrection happened.

As you can imagine, it's unclear whether this is actually the site where Jesus was buried. A few years ago, *National Geographic* ran a breathless article about archaeologists at the site who made a remarkable discovery. You read the article expecting the kicker to be that they confirmed this to be the place that Jesus was buried. But the reveal is just that the tomb you can visit today is in the same location as the one built in the fourth century. Good news for the pilgrims who are there to pay tribute to fourth century architecture. No news for those who are there to see where Jesus rose from the dead. Only in a sentence does the article mention that you could never actually verify where Jesus was buried.

Whether this is actually the empty tomb is a less interesting question than why an empty tomb is so captivating to us. The idea that you can go to the empty tomb is an appealing one. This is the place where Jesus was. And now that Jesus has been resurrected, he's no longer here. It is real. It exists. You can point to it. You can take a picture of it. You can even build a church on top of it.

There are plenty of people who make the empty tomb the cornerstone of the Easter message. The tomb is empty, so Jesus has been raised. We often make the empty tomb into a kind of litmus test for whether Jesus was actually raised from the dead or not. An empty tomb is an end to the argument. The tomb is empty or it's not. Jesus rose or he didn't. It's settled.

But in the gospel stories of the resurrection, it isn't clear what the empty tomb means. Consider Mary Magdalene. On the first day of the week, John tells us, Mary went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. She is grieving the loss of her friend whom she loved. And what does she discover? An empty tomb. And unlike the pilgrims today who encounter an empty tomb as proof of new life, Mary encounters it as a sign of death. Instead of fleeing to tell the disciples about Jesus' resurrection, Mary runs to tell them that, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." For Mary, the empty tomb becomes a sign of even more death. Not only is Jesus dead, but his disciples won't even get the chance to bury him.

The empty tomb is ambiguous. It doesn't mean anything by itself. You can understand why the early church never made a terribly big deal of the empty tomb. Because it doesn't actually tell you anything. In fact, when you read St. Paul's letters, the oldest material in the New Testament, there is no mention of the empty tomb at all. There's lots about the resurrection and Christ's victory over death, but at no point is that ever contingent on an empty tomb.

That reminds us that any resurrection that you can point to, that you can contain, that you can build a chapel on top of and put a plaque next to, isn't a resurrection at all. At the heart of our Easter proclamation is not an empty tomb but a risen Lord.

That idea is reinforced in St. John's telling of that Easter morning. Which is a story not about Jesus rising from the dead but about Mary Magdalene coming to faith. I mentioned already the ambiguity of the empty tomb in the story. But Mary's reaction to the risen Christ is equally confusing. When she encounters the risen Jesus, she doesn't understand who he is. And it isn't until Jesus speaks her name, until Mary realizes that she is known, that she comes to recognize Jesus.

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There's a lot you can unpack in that moment, but what I want to spend more time on is what happens next. Mary's response to this experience of new life is to grab on to it. After going through so much death and grief, Mary is desperate for an assurance of something better. And the way she tries to get that is by keeping it close. But Jesus tells Mary. "Do not hold on to me." In some translations, this gets phrased as, "Do not cling to me," which has some more emotional weight. Jesus invites Mary and, of course, us, to resurrection and new life. But he does it in an unusual way. Not by saying that death doesn't exist or that he's going to fix all of our problems. Not by saying that he won't go anywhere and anytime you need a promise of new life you can come back here. Jesus invites us to encounter the resurrection by saying, "You need to let go. You need to stop clinging."

We cling because we want to be sure that we're right. We cling because a false sense of certainty is easier to manage than a faith that leaves us wondering. Our obsession with the empty tomb is its own kind of clinging. We cling to the belief that if the tomb is empty, the resurrection becomes a little bit more reasonable. The only logical explanation for what happened.

But we cling to all kinds of other things, too. We cling to stories we tell about ourselves, mostly that the world's problems would go away if people were more like us. We cling to ideas we have about other people, in particular that they can be reduced down to the worst thing they've ever done. We cling to religion, using theology as a cudgel instead of an embrace. We cling to ideology, as if we are one of the insiders who truly see the world correctly. One of the things this pandemic has revealed to us is our propensity to cling to a sense of exceptionalism. That we are different and can't be affected. That if we ignore something we can make it go away. We think that clinging brings us life, but so often our clinging just leads us into even more death.

So if the empty tomb is not the sign of the resurrection, if the empty tomb is just a cave, what is the thing that points people toward the resurrected Christ? What is the thing that makes resurrection credible? There's a hint in today's reading from Colossians when the author tells the early believers to "set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Why did the leaders of the early church spend so much time encouraging people to form their own lives around resurrection and new life instead of describing an empty tomb? Because those early believers were the sign of the resurrection. The evidence of the resurrection is not an empty tomb but a people who, like Mary Magdalene, have been transformed. It is people who have heard Christ's invitation let go of death and receive new life. Who have moved beyond clinging to their ideologies, their weapons, their narratives, their animosities, who have begun to receive the gift that Jesus is giving them.

The power of the resurrection, the credibility of the resurrection, is not something you can point at or cordon off or put in a museum. It is something that emerges when we accept Jesus's invitation to stop clinging to our old hopes and small dreams. It is something that comes along the way, when we follow Jesus out of the Easter garden back into the city of God.

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