St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church

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Easter Day, Year A

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There is an empty tomb which figures noticeably in our gospel story today. As we see, that empty tomb can be a sign or a symbol to us of the worst we can be, the location of our deepest despair, or that which plunges us into a tailspin of shame and guilt. So, we can imagine it was for Peter. The last time he saw Jesus was when he was standing outside the courtyard where Jesus was convicted. He denied him a third time, they heard the cock crow, and their eyes met for the last time. For even to this servant-girl, this nobody in society, he denied his knowledge or association with Jesus. It must have been a sword piercing his own heart, for he denied one of his closest friends, his rabbi, his mentor, the one who he saw multiply the loaves and fishes, calm the chaotic sea. He couldn’t even drag himself to see his Lord be crucified, to witness to what they had been to each other, to provide a modicum of support for the one he loved more than anyone. Peter knew better than to have denied him. He failed miserably. It almost seemed that he and Jesus were on opposite ends of their friendship, their integrity, the truth. Peter shamefully denied Jesus in front of someone who had no power over him. Jesus boldly walked into his sentence and death.

So, we find Peter in this morning’s gospel dashing to the tomb after Mary has reported they have taken the Lord and we do not know where they have laid him. Why is he dashing? Why is he on this footrace with the beloved disciple? What does he expect or hope to see? Perhaps he can imagine that the body has been laid nearby and he can kneel by it, weep it over and ask for forgiveness from it. Or maybe the mere mention of Jesus’ name jolts him out of his stupor of shame and the voice and touch of Jesus is becoming real again and he knows there’s yet more to do. Peter, in his usual brashness and acting before thinking mode, charged into the tomb and found the linen wrappings there and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. The beloved disciple looks in, sees and believes. We don’t know what, perhaps only that Jesus’ body is not there. Then the men return to their homes.

The empty tomb for Peter could have been a reminder that nothing has happened as he thought it would. Jesus is dead, he denied him as Jesus predicted, and they couldn’t even keep his body safe. It’s done, it’s finished. There is nothing left. He and the rest of the disciples have been a complete failure. I picture Peter in the dark of his home, shoulders slumped over, head in his hands, and tears spilling from his eyes. For Peter, the empty tomb is a place of desolation, of hopelessness, of wondering of how things went so terribly wrong, in what seemed like a blink of an eye.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we too have been there, a place where there has been a physical or spiritual manifestation of our shame and human frailty and sometimes we want to go into the tomb and take a seat there. There’s almost some comfort there. But of course, our story doesn’t really end here for Peter, and it doesn’t for us either.

The empty tomb had a different meaning to someone else in our story this morning, to Mary. Initially, when she detected the stone was rolled away, she didn’t even take time to confirm Jesus’ body was no longer there, she bounded to the conclusion that the same people who killed him, have stolen his body, the body she wanted to hold onto once more, anoint with fragrant oils and spices, and profess her love to. She heard the rumors that Joseph of Arimathea had asked for his body and she immediately knew that this was trouble, because Joseph was a Sanhedrin, a member of the same council which condemned Jesus. She didn’t know Joseph secretly was a follower of Jesus and that he and Nicodemus, the one who came to Jesus at night, the one who had that most strange conversation with Jesus about being born again from the Spirit and left bewildered, that they gave Jesus not just a proper burial, which was uncommon for people crucified, but one fit for king, with the 100 pounds of spices brought by Nicodemus. Mary only knew someone had taken him, and she turns to the others who loved Jesus to share this news. As she was dashing to Peter’s house, she probably had no idea what he could do, or would want to do, but she may not have been looking for them to solve the problem, so much as to have someone with whom to share her pain. The men disciples arrived at the tomb, breathlessly, looked within, and left. Mary stays. One may say “she abides” with the emptiness, until it is familiar enough that she looks inside the tomb, spots the angels, who don’t say the customary greeting of “Do not be afraid”, but rather, ask, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She blurts out, “They have taken my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him!” She turns, sees someone she presumes to be a gardener, and begs him to tell her where he has laid him. Jesus calls her by name and she knows her Lord is there in front of her. She is seeing her Lord and she runs to hold onto him.

Mary was initially startled by the emptiness of the tomb, but then she returned, settling into and abiding with the darkness and the void until she could go deeper into it cavern, and there was given what she was needed to turn around and see her Lord before her. Mary learned that when she walked into the desolation, not from it, as Peter did, the tomb set her on a path toward her resurrection, her new understanding of the truth of Jesus.

The same empty tomb, opposite responses. One, we can imagine catapulting Peter into a place of further despair, for he hadn’t the eyes to see the angels inside, turning him toward his Lord, perhaps blinded by his shame. The other, setting Mary into motion on the path toward new life, with new eyes, otherwise known as resurrection.

It is noteworthy that Jesus does not come back looking as he did before death. Mary didn’t recognize him until he called her name. Coming back to what we were before is called resuscitation, or being restored to a previous state. That’s not what Jesus was or is about. Jesus is about that continual process of being made anew. This means not changing for the sake of change alone, not changing only to circle around and return to a previous state, but to continually allow to die that which is not of God within us. A spiritual death that leads to spiritual resurrection. For Peter that might have been the shame, or guilt, or anger at himself, which is so easy to hold onto. Peter needed that to die in order to see the new path Jesus was placing him on, of meeting him again, and being filled with a renewed sense of purpose. He wasn’t ready to see or embrace this when he ran into the tomb, but the story didn’t end there.

Mary had to die to her assumption that the same people who killed Jesus took his body from her, to offer a final betrayal to her heart, from the world she lived in When she allowed that assumption to die, when she leaned into the tomb of her sorrow, she found something bright, light, and offering her life, and she turned and saw her Lord. Easter is about letting something die so we can experience our resurrection.

As I departed on my pilgrimage to the Holy Land this past fall, I went with the phrase in my heart, planted there by John Phillip Newell, that a pilgrimage is a return to our place of resurrection, to that open place of new life. I didn’t go to the Land of the Holy only see the historical sites attached to the gospel stories of Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection, although that was an important part of the trip. But I went to discover or reconnect to the source of resurrection in my life. I wanted to know again and anew the stance I needed every day to find my resurrection, that place offered to me by Jesus’ resurrection, that place where I can commit myself to God all over again and to find renewed strength, plentiful possibilities, new life, and love. Isn’t that what we are all searching for this Easter morning?

I found my place of resurrection as I placed my palms and forehead against the clammy and cold Western Wall, the only remaining wall of the temple structure at Jesus’ time, situated among Jews and Christians, all praying to the same God, many offering their hearts that morning as part of their daily ritual of prayer. I found my place of resurrection as I knelt at the anointing slab near the Edicule, the site of tomb of Jesus, presumably where Jesus’ own body laid and was anointed by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, as the scent of the musky oil rose from the marble slap and wafted through the air and mysteriously drew all of us together into the healing presence of Jesus. In each of these places, and many more during that trip, I found the place of my resurrection when I surrendered my whole heart to God, when I poured all my love out, lavishly, abundantly, completely, without reservation, and with joy, to the God who rose Jesus from the dead, on Easter morning. It was reconfirmed to me that there is nothing ever to fear in the surrender, for all that came to me each time my heart broke open was a sense of peace and joy. Yes, sometimes, this surrender makes me feel the pain of the world more fully, but that’s not a bad thing, for that just means there are more places I am invited to offer the grace which has been freely offered to me, from the God who loved us enough to redeem even death and who invites us to come and follow Jesus through death and into resurrection, this day.

On one of the days in the Holy Land, as we rolled up our pant legs and carefully navigated the rather large stones on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and saw the tiny fish swirling around our legs, we laughed with joy until we nearly cried, that here we were on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus had breakfast with Peter, a few days after his death. This is where Peter’s resurrection happens. Because when Peter couldn’t push away his shame and couldn’t conceive of how to follow a Jesus he denied, he went back to fishing. He tried to fit back into his old life, for he couldn’t see the shape of a new life yet. As we walked out from the Sea, our gaze hung on a bronze statue of Jesus and Peter: Peter kneeling before his Lord, his face raised to Jesus, not just in submission but in devotion, their eyes meeting once more, and Jesus with an outstretched hand blessing him. This statue says it all, all that really constitutes our faith: Jesus will search us out, Jesus will not leave us in fear, or shame, or pain, Jesus will liberate us from whatever it is that holds us back from wanting or searching for a renewed life with Christ, and he will bless us in our human frailty, wherever we have been, whatever tombs we have resided in or run from, whatever blindness we have worn so as to not embrace the fullness offered to us, Jesus will find us, turn toward us, and bless us. And our faithful response? Complete surrender to a love which changes our world.

On Easter morning, we celebrate that God raised Jesus from the dead. We celebrate the power of love. We rejoice that there is no ending from which God cannot create a new beginning. For this is the Easter message. Embrace its fullness, for Jesus is searching for you, turning toward you, and blessing you in your new life with the risen Christ. For this, we shout Alleluia! Alleluia!

Amen.