

Sermon Preached on April 17, 2022 – Easter Sunday

By The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Acts of the Apostles 10:34-43

Luke 24:1-12

The Empty Tomb

My first call as a pastor was in East Hartford, CT at a lovely, small Lutheran Church.

Down the road from us was a larger, Evangelical Church that every year around Holy Week produced a Passion Play.

And, boy, what a play!

It was a major production – lights, musical numbers, incredible costumes.

Their building was already set up like an auditorium with the stage and a lot of seating, but I think even for this production the space was transformed.

One of my colleagues invited me to go with her to one of the shows and I was amazed at the quality of the production – I'm pretty sure most of the cast were members of the church and the surrounding community, and the talent was top notch.

One part of the play continues to stand out to me in my memory: after Jesus has died, his body carried to the tomb and stone rolled in front of it – the lights dim just as we dimmed our lights on Good Friday – and then, the lights begin to flicker, I think there was even a rumbling sound, and then all of a sudden the stone rolls away and out jumps Jesus pausing a moment in his best superhero power stance to take in the standing ovation that has erupted around me.

The lights go dark and when they come back up, Jesus was no longer on the stage – just the tomb with the stone rolled away.

I think you can guess why this part of the play continues to stick out to me – it's the least biblical part of the whole play.

Oh, did you think it was the superhero power stance? That was good, too.

But, this play revealed something that is not revealed in any of the four gospels in our Scripture – in neither Matthew, Mark, Luke, nor John do we hear “and the lights flickered and the ground rumbled, the stone rolled away and Jesus walked out”.

The four gospels differ on a lot of the details surrounding Jesus' death and the resurrection, but on two details they all agree: it was the women who went to the tomb early that morning to anoint their friend's body, and it was the women who found an empty tomb.

Only in the gospel of John does Mary Magdalene actually encounter the risen Lord at the tomb – and she mistakes him for the gardener.

No triumphant exit, like Lazarus, no superhero stance.

Just an empty tomb.

Debie Thomas, writer and thinker, wrote some years ago: “The fact is, the resurrection happened in total [morning] darkness. Sometime in the predawn hours of that Sunday morning, a great mystery transpired in secret. No sunlight illuminated the event. No human being witnessed it.”¹

A great mystery – and all we have are the women and the empty tomb.

Wonder, awe, confusion, overwhelm, disbelief.

That’s the first reaction to the resurrection, the empty tomb.

No standing ovation, not even an “alleluia”.

In this morning’s reading from Luke, the glistening holy beings that meet the women at the tomb have to remind them: “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

In other words – what you’re witnessing here is holy! It is divine! This is not a grave robbed, this is a grave shattered by the love and grace of God!

The women run to tell the other disciples, becoming the first apostles to declare the resurrection of our Lord.

Let me repeat that because it often goes unnoticed: the women – “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women” according to Luke – run to tell the other disciples what they witnessed, becoming the first apostles to declare the resurrection of our Lord.

And their telling, their witness, is met with more confusion, more agony, more disbelief.

The disciples, ever Jesus’ faithful companions, don’t react with “alleluia! Jesus said this would happen, we never doubted him!”

No no no – Peter RUNS to the tomb himself to see it with his own eyes.

Joy Moore, a professor of preaching, writes that “Understanding and obedience are not the first responses of Jesus followers [to the empty tomb]. More like: Perplexity and amazement, cynicism and unbelief. The disciples are clueless concerning the meaning of Jesus’ death, disappointed by this presumed dashing of their hopes, and astounded by reports of the empty tomb”²

¹ Thomas, Debie. “I have Seen the Lord,” *Journey with Jesus*. 14 April 2019. <<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2172-i-have-seen-the-lord>>

² Moore, Joy J, “It’s the Journey that Matters,” *Working Preacher*. 12 April 2022. <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/its-the-journey-that-matters>>

Perplexity and amazement, cynicism and unbelief, disappointment and astoundedness.

If you came here this morning with any of these feelings in your own heart about the resurrection of Jesus – you're doing Easter right!

If you've ever doubted the resurrection, wondered how it was possible, questioned what it meant, wondered if you truly believed it – you are in the company of St. Peter, you are in the company of Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were the first apostles – the first instructed to tell others about the empty tomb.

Did they understand exactly what the empty tomb meant, not.at.all...at first.

Our worship this morning with all of the "alleluias" and the hymns and the declarations of "Christ is Risen!" don't come from the biblical narratives of that first Easter morning.

Our worship this morning, like the play in CT, leans into the stories that are to follow this one today – stories of encounters with the risen Christ in physical form.

Our worship this morning leans into two thousand years of meaning making – from councils that produced creeds, denominations that produced liturgy.

What we get this morning is the culmination of generations of the faithful helping us to understand that the empty tomb means Jesus is risen! Death is no more! God is among us – we should no longer search for the living among the dead!

For so many of us, it feels like as Christians we're supposed to not only know exactly what the resurrection means to us, we're supposed to believe it unflinchingly, and perhaps in some denominations that might be true.

But, I think the more common experience of faith, is the one that is modeled after Jesus' own disciples, which is what happens now – the journey to understanding, the journey to faith, to belief.

How do we react to the empty tomb?

Does our hope die there? Does our journey end there?

Or does our curiosity grow there?

Do we start searching for the risen Christ in our midst?

Do we look for the living among the living?

The journey begins here, my friends, the journey begins now.

The tomb is empty! The tomb is empty! The tomb is empty!

Alleluia!

Amen.