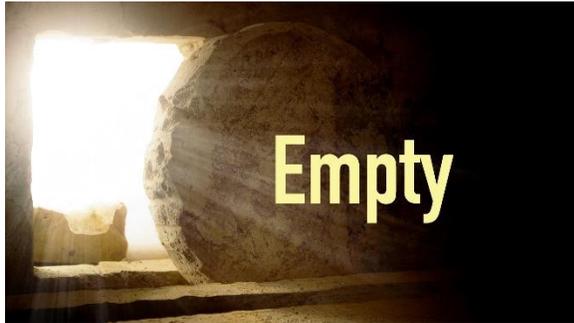


Title: Empty

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Text: [Matthew 28:1-10](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



"I feel sorry for you guys," someone said on one of my walks this week. Walking your dog takes a lot longer these days. Have you noticed that? There are lots of people in the neighborhood and everyone wants to talk, little groups of people standing six feet apart, socially engaging while social distancing. "What guys?" I asked.

"You preachers." I stiffened up thinking I was in trouble. Usually when I hear, "You preachers" an accusation follows. "You preachers love to pack the house on Easter, count the noses of those of us who only show up twice a year. But this year, you've got nothing. You, the Pope, Charles Stanley, all of you guys, preaching to empty sanctuaries. I'm afraid this year, Easter is all about empty."

I appreciate his concern but, "this year?" If you look carefully, Easter is always about being afraid, and being empty. If there is one thing that the gospels agree upon, it's fear and emptiness.

Early on Easter morning, the women went to the tomb. Again, all the gospels agree on this, even if they don't agree on the number or the names. Matthew tells us that it was Mary Magdalene and the other Mary which, is Matthew's way of saying, it's Mary, the mother Jesus.

Just about the time they get there, the original member of the Rolling Stones shows up. He didn't look like skinny Mick Jagger in tight jeans¹. He was a buff, cut angel looking more like Jean-Francois Caron that Canadian who set the record as the strongest man in the world, flipping 1650-pound tractor tire four times. It shook the ground and so did the stone in front of Jesus' tomb because it was at least that heavy. Matthew says it caused a great earthquake. And then, this muscular angel jumps on top of it the stone he'd just rolled aside and sat there proudly, looking like lightning dressed in snow. What was he doing, humming a few bars of "You Can't Always Get What You Want?" Hey, Caiaphas. Hey, Pilate? You wanted to bury Jesus? Is that what you wanted? Well, sorry. You can't always get

what you want. This is what God thinks of your effort to put the Messiah in a tomb. A tomb as a prison for the Son of God? I don't think so."²

The effect was to create such terror among those guards that they might as well have been dead. The rolling stone angel doesn't care if they are afraid or not. But he does care about the women and says so as they are arrived on the scene, shocked by zombie guards, a bodybuilder angel, and an open tomb. He quickly offers, "Do not be afraid."

The Good News is often preceded by this code language, a short, preliminary sentence: "Don't be afraid."

"Don't be afraid, Zechariah, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John."

"Don't be afraid, Mary. Good News. You've found favor with God."

"Don't be afraid, shepherds. I bring you good news of great joy that shall be to all people."

"Don't be afraid, Joseph. Take Mary as your wife. Her baby is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Name him Jesus; he's going to save all people from their sins. Don't be afraid."

"Don't be afraid." Really? They were nothing but afraid. Just a week ago, life was wonderful, filled with joyful shouts about Jesus being the king. Then, seemingly without warning, they were attacked. Jesus had been betrayed by one closest to him. He'd been rejected by the very people he came to serve. He been beaten to an inch of his life and then, crucified, a "breath-taking" type of torture that stole the air from the body in a particularly terrifying way. Don't be afraid? The last three days left them hiding behind closed doors, going on out only when they needed to, hiding the faces for fear that the very same thing would happen to them.

It is a familiar story. Weeks ago, life was wonderful. Then, without warning, it came and suddenly, we were under attack. COVID-19 is a "breath-taking" virus. It steals the air from people's bodies in a particularly terrifying way. It strikes suddenly leaving us frightened. With no cure in sight, the only thing we can do is hide away, covering our noses and faces with cloth, hoping that the very same thing won't happen to us. Don't be afraid? It's impossible not to be afraid.

Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus. He is not here; the tomb is empty. "For he has been raised, as he said." (Matthew 28:6). As he said? Jesus told them this would happen.

Did they stop and think about what he said, not once, not twice but three times? The Son of Man was going to Jerusalem to suffer, be killed and then raised from the dead. Three times he told them his tomb would be empty. Jesus tried to deliver the good news to the disciples, but they didn't hear it, or understand it or accept it. Why would they think an empty tomb was anything other than an empty promise?

Why do we—like them—despite the witness of Scripture, tradition, and our life of worship, still come to so many situations in our life, like the pandemic that we are living through and see empty as nothing, a dark void that sucks hope dry.

But that's not who we are. For people of faith, empty is full. Empty is where you meet Jesus. You can't meet the resurrected Jesus without going through empty. If the tomb wasn't empty, we would only know a dead Jesus. But empty has the power and promise of seeing resurrected life. And that is exactly what happens. The women leave the tomb with fear and great joy and they run right into resurrection, run right into Jesus himself using the Bible's code language for Good News. Don't be afraid. Empty is what I promised and with it, the power of new life. Now go and tell the disciples where to find me.

Easter is an opportunity to enter an empty tomb and see the vision of an open future for you and the world. A stone hasn't been rolled over our future but removed from it, assuring us that we have one. Emptiness, an empty tomb, means that the possibilities for life are open forever.

The empty tomb is a call to fill the world with the resurrected life of Christ, to go and tell, because the resurrection draws us away from ourselves, away from concerns about pandemics and shortages, away from indifference and inactivity, pulls us on to a path of action, freeing us to move and speak and worship Jesus because of the joy of the resurrection because the tomb is empty.

There is a wonderful story that illustrates this truth, about Philip, an eight-year-old boy born with Down Syndrome. He went to Sunday School faithfully every week and was a part of a third-grade class with nine other eight-year-olds. As you might imagine, Philip, with his differences, wasn't readily accepted by all of the eight-year-olds in his class. The teacher was sensitive

to all of this and tried to do his best to make everyone feel a part of the group. He came up with an idea for the Sunday after Easter.

He collected ten big plastic egg containers, the ones that can be filled with Easter candy, and he gave one to each child. The assignment was for each child to go outside, find a symbol for a new life, put it in the egg, and bring it back to the classroom for a time of sharing. The children ran wild all over the church property to find their symbols. When they got back to the classroom, they put all of the eggs on a table, and then the teacher began to open them as all the children gathered around. He opened one egg and there was a flower, and there were lots of "ooooos."

He opened another and there was a little butterfly— "aaaaahhhs." He opened another and there was a rock. And then some "ohhhhs" and some laughter. The teacher then opened the next one and there was nothing inside. Some of the children blurted out, "That's not fair. That's stupid! Somebody didn't do it right."

Then the teacher felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down. It was Philip and he said, "It's mine. That one is mine." Some of the children responded, "You don't ever do things right, Philip. There's nothing there!" Philip summoned enough courage and said, "I did so do it right!" I did do it right. The tomb is empty!"

Ironically, from that day forward, Philip became closer to the group of these eight-year-olds. But later that same year, due to other health issues, Philip died. At his memorial service, these nine eight-year-old children, along with their Sunday School teacher, marched up to the altar, not with flowers to cover or hide death, but with an empty egg container to show death's defeat; and they laid it on the altar.³

Philip was right. The tomb is empty, but our future isn't. Do not be afraid. Resurrection is coming. The signs are all around us. We will emerge renewed and restored. So, celebrate the one who overcame death then, now and evermore.

Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed.

¹ "Don't be afraid." April 16, 2017, by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

² <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/favorite-angel-alyce-mckenzie-04-11-2014>

³ Powery.