

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Easter Sunday

April 21, 2019

Scriptures:
John 20:1-18

Empty

She stood at the empty tomb dumbfounded.

Is it possible that: Christ is risen?

They heard it from Mary later that morning, but was it really true that:

Christ is risen?

We stand beside the empty tombs of our broken dreams, our shattered plans, and our frayed hopes, and we wonder if it can really happen again that:

Christ is risen.

Yes, it is not only possible. It is true: Christ Is Risen!

Risen Indeed!

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Let us Pray

Astounding God, very early on this first day you caught chaos unawares:

planting grace in a garden, setting love loose on creation, flinging joy into the air.

Jesus, Sun of Justice, very early on that first day you staggered sin, throwing its weight off the world; you confounded death, leaving it alone in the grave; you opened the gates of the kingdom, so all could follow you into life.

Sacred Spirit, very early on this first day of the week, while we were washing sleep from our eyes and trying to make sense of our lives, you sang glad songs to us, rolling away fears from our hearts so we can see the Risen Lord.

Risen One,

with Mary Magdalene,

help us recognize you this day

as we hear your word and feast together.

You are "Rabboni," our Teacher, our Guide.

Come speak to us,

that we might be messengers of your love

and doers of your word. Amen.

EMPTY - video

Everyone of us has known Empty from time to time. In the last weeks that have been so busy with work in worship we have been focusing on how empty our lives can be when we don't stop,

when we don't breath when we don't take time to notice God and God's love and grace at work all around us.

Empty. That's how the disciples must have felt. Empty was the anguish they carried. So often when I feel empty I don't stop I push harder - until I'm so drained I can't even function for another moment. So coming out of this lenten series on slowing down while also setting myself up for a time of significant rest personally I noticed something new. Something really important in our Easter story.

If you slow down, you'll notice too that they waited until the "third day" to return to the tomb because of the intervening Sabbath. See, in those days it was completely different. You didn't just work on the Sabbath — even if it's tending to Jesus' precious body! You didn't work.

I can't imagine pausing like they did. I would have gone from the cross to the grave, prepared the spices and gone right back (well at least I hope I would have - if I had been a disciple back in the day). After all Have you ever noticed how many times Christians say: "Jesus was abandoned by ALL His friends"? Let's take note of that because that is not exactly true. If you look at the full story - not just from the male disciples perspective you will notice that The women never left. **THE WOMEN STAYED.** Until His last breath and beyond. And it was also a woman who was the first to discover he was Risen!

By God's Grace i would have been with the other women weeping at the foot of His cross. His mother stayed, his female friends stayed. Until the sabbath when they went and rested because the last breath has been drawn and he was laid in the tomb. And then their faith commanded they rest. Not a bad command. If we were to be command following people these days it is one I think we should re-instate.

After all, resurrection is the kind of thing only God can do, and only while we are doing nothing at all, while we are resting. God is at work.

The women's commitment to Jesus was true. Having walked with him in life, they walked with him in death and having breathed his last breath you can imagine their breath was also taken away. Empty. Sorrow, despair, watching right up to his body being taken from the cross and laid in the tomb, in that moment their hope for restoration, for new life for Israel was buried right alongside their friend and saviour. While they felt empty they sought to go prepare for their final act of love. They went to ready the spices for burial. They prepared their final act of worship so lovingly that scripture tells us that before they were finished the sabbath arrived and so they rested as required by law.

I wonder how often when we should be resting and allowing God to heal us we are doing. There is so much to do and with the protestant work ethic many of us were raised with, we just don't stop. Work is a spiritual virtue while rest is lazy. The problem is the work is never finished. I am realizing that really clearly as I attempt to head out on sabbatical. The work is never finished. There is never a good time to take the time to heal and recover and rest, there is too much to do.

There are board meetings, and floors to be replaced, and concerts to be had, and hiring to be done, and worship to be led, and tasks to be explained and just a few more pastoral visits and... These women rested because they believed the sabbath was a requirement of God and they believed the sabbath was made for them and so they rested.

We don't rest because we have an unhealthy view of our worth. Even God rested on the 7th day. God wasn't worn out. God simply knew God's worth and if we are made in the image of God should we not too recognize that we are worth resting too. Resting so that we recover, so that we can recognize the Glory of God, the risen Christ that the rest of creation sings every spring time after it has rested.

While we welcome Easter as so pleasant, we should note that, unanimously, the first witnesses were flat out terrified. The "He is not here, he is risen" reminds me of the many places we think Christ must be but he's on the loose, not so blithely contained where we expect him to be. He's everywhere else. It makes me think of the boxes we put God into. We expect him to be where we want him to be and yet she blows in like the wind in unexpected ways and places.

We are just like these women. No doubt on that sabbath day of rest they grieved, they cried, they slept, they felt empty that is likely why God created the sabbath so that we would actually have time to do those things rather than avoid them. The power of God is often found in the pause. Just like in music it is often the pauses that make us really take notice so that we can hear the next note or phrase. These women knew the story was over, they had watched Jesus breathe his last breath, they had witnessed him placed in the tomb, they knew there were to be soldiers guarding the tomb and a large stone had sealed it up. There was nothing more they could do so they rested.

And then scripture tells us "While it was still dark..." Mary headed to the tomb. Mary had been with Jesus all the way. She had seen lives made new, bodies healed, and eyes opened. She had heard the complaining of the disciples and the criticism of the religious leaders. She saw how the crowds adored him and the rulers hated him. She stood under the cross as they killed him, and her heart was broken open. She had seen the adoration of the people when they entered the city on Sunday and their hostility when they stood before Pilate at the end of the week. Now it was all over. She may have thought, "The least I can do is anoint the body with spices. Everyone deserves a proper burial. Her heart was heavy and in her soul, "...it was still dark."

That empty, forlorn feeling is perhaps like the feeling that political campaign workers have when their candidate has lost. Someone has to go back to the office and pack up the stuff. Or a hockey team that has been eliminated in the playoffs. Their season is over...no Stanley Cup for them. The only thing to do is to clean out the lockers and head home.

What will we do now the women wondered? Peter and the others could go fishing; they could start their businesses again. Perhaps we could have a reunion in a couple of years and talk about old times. About the only thing she could think of was perhaps starting a memorial society for a

dead Galilean preacher. Sadness, disappointment, and emptiness had been her companions since Friday. It had been a good three-year run, but now it was over.

Let's face it. We all have our days when we stand with our dreams in shambles around our feet. Our children go astray. We get the pink slip from our employer, or worse still, the test comes back from the lab as positive. This happens to good people as well as to those who haven't been so good. "Why me, Lord?" I go to church with regularity. I'm even on the board, I make coffee, I read scripture. My life was going so well and now this darkness.

What we must all learn, and it is a very difficult lesson, is that it is easy to believe in the sunlight but very difficult to believe in the darkness. It is easy to believe when life is good, but when it turns sour the natural inclination is to feel rejected or guilty. Anyone can walk in the sunshine; only the faithful can walk in the dark. In fact, if you have blood in your veins and skin on your bones, you will have some darkness. No one has all sunshine. Remember all sunshine produces a desert, not a garden.

However, a close examination of the text reveals something helpful. When it was yet dark...God was at work. God was making a way where there was no way. Have no doubt about it, when things get tough--and they will--it does not mean that God has abandoned you. When the darkness comes upon you, God is still working on your behalf. Mary didn't leave Jesus or deny him. She remained faithful to him while waiting for the light.

See while the women were resting God was up to something with the body. While the women are resting away from the tomb God is at work in the tomb. You can imagine their conversation as they get up early Sunday morning still in their grief and emptiness they wonder how they will convince the soldiers to let them in, they wonder who will roll the stone away? But they get to the tomb and instead of soldiers they discover angels. They came to anoint a dead body but they leave having to announce a risen saviour.

This story reminds us that even in our most difficult situations God is working to bring light and to dispel our dark situations. The good news is not only that Jesus was raised from the tomb, but the character of God is revealed in Jesus. He is light and love.

God is piercing Mary's emptiness and darkness along with ours. God not only ministers to her with comforting angels, he calls her into usefulness. Go and tell the apostles. The dispelling of our darkness demands that we tell others in order to complete the cure. To let the world know that love and life and hope exist.

Most of us have difficulty acknowledging that the same power that rolled away the stone that covered the mouth of the cave where Jesus was buried can roll away the stones that have plagued our lives. But that is the story of our day. "Jesus is *not just back then*, in this place or that place. He is everywhere and in every time." The hope is that the power of the resurrection will dispel our darkness and enable us to live resurrection, empowered lives.

These women never stopped loving, they never stopped seeking and they heard the voice of Jesus say to their empty spaces and their empty lives once again. Just as he says to you today.

28 “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.
29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will
find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” That is the story for us
today. Rest in faith, rest in peace, know that you are cherished and loved. When you fill empty
may you experience the light of life, who would not let hated or evil or despair win, who longs
for you to know love and life conquer all. May we know the new life of Christ this day.

Amen - Happy Easter