

# FROM THE EMPTY TOMB



Easter Sunday  
Matthew 28:1-10  
Psalm 8

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O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name  
throughout the earth.

You who have covered the heavens with Your splendor!

From the mouths of babes and infants You have established strength  
among Your foes—

You have silenced the enemy and put an end to the avenger.

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers—the moon and  
stars that You set in place—what are human beings that You are  
mindful of them; mortals that You care for them?

You have made us little less than angels and adorned us with glory and  
honor. You have given us dominion over Your handiwork, laying the  
world at our feet—

Sheep, oxen, and all the wild beasts as well; birds of the air and fish of  
the sea,

Whatever travels the paths of the sea.

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!

This week, a church member sent me a text, just to cheer me up. We are doing a lot of that these days, I think—trying to cheer one another while we are isolated, surrounded by nothing but bad news. This text included a meme showing Tom Hanks in character as Forest Gump, and he was saying, “And just like that, my pastor was a Televangelist.”

Just like that, preachers all over the country have taken on the mantle of televangelists, live streaming worship by preaching to empty sanctuaries, leading prayers in the basement or the kitchen, trying to turn the coffee table into an altar. I fear Martha Stewart is working on this topic for her next book.

Were it not for the coronavirus, all the signs of the world around us proclaim Easter. Spring birds have returned, daffodils are blooming. Pictures of Los Angeles show that even the smog has lifted from over the city. In my neighborhood, on a nice day like yesterday, the streets are no longer for cars, but are overrun with people walking, jogging, biking, skateboarding. So many people, it is hard to keep social distance out of doors. Gasoline prices have dropped under \$2 a gallon, but no one has anywhere to go.

The medieval church used to lock up the church doors on Good Friday afternoon. They would chain the doors shut with a padlock and leave the church building bound like that until Easter morning, when, instead of rolling away a stone, they would break the padlock and open the doors to the smells of flowers and incense, to fresh baked bread, and the joyous music of Easter hymns.

Little of that today. We make what live music we can. We’ve got a couple of lilies, but the church is empty, and it is easy to imagine that like the women on that first Easter, we are disciples who have found that the tomb is empty, and we don’t quite know what to make of it.

Sweeter was loss than silver coins to spend,

Sweeter was famine than the belly filled

Better than blood in the vein was the blood spilled...

For then it was, his neighbor was his friend.

This is a fragment of a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay. She explores the paradox that is at the heart of Easter—sweeter was loss than silver coins to spend—something that Judas learns too late. Here we sit on Easter Sunday morning unable to gather and celebrate the most unlikely victory of Christ over the powers of death—the victory that makes all our losses sweet.

The paraments are hung like used grave clothes. The dishes are on the table, but nothing to eat and no one to share with. Yet sweeter is the famine and better is the blood that was spilled. Sweetest of all, perhaps, is to remember a promise that we often take for granted—that Jesus should call us “his friends.” Even from the cross, Jesus is making friends among his neighbors. Luke tells us that Pilate and Herod who were bitter rivals became life long friends after their encounter with Jesus. John tells us of how Jesus makes a family by giving his mother, Mary, and his friend John, into the care of each another. Three criminals crucified on Friday, with Jesus in the middle, reconciling the two in the same way that he reconciled the world to God—through the blood of his cross.

All 4 Gospels tell us about the empty tomb. These accounts differ in detail, but the heart of the story is the same. Matthew has a flare for the dramatic, so he tells us about two women—each named Mary, who bravely go to a tomb where Pilate has placed armed guards. It should be noted that women were crucified by the Romans as well as men, yet these women dare to approach the guarded graveyard. Suddenly, there is an earthquake, the appearance of an angel, and the stone is rolled back. “Do not be afraid,” says the angel. Mark tells us it was a young man—not angel; then again, Mark plays his hand close to the vest. He wants us to decide if this is the work of God or some other power.

In all these stories, the men and women are confused and fearful. “Do not be afraid” echoes across every telling of the resurrection. There is a message for the disciples, that the disciples will soon meet Jesus, though the four witnesses disagree on whether this meeting is to be in Jerusalem or Galilee. The empty tomb is the beginning of faith, but not its end.

While these stories remind us of how alien is this experience of resurrection, there are touchstones that ground us in everyday experience, and remind us of what Abraham Lincoln called “our better angels.” The joy and kindness and holiness of angels is addressed to human beings, reminding us that human beings are created in the image and likeness of the divine. In other words, resurrection is central to who and what we are.

What is a human being that You are mindful of them, O God? The psalmist asks, and a question is more spacious than statement, far better suited to expressing wonder. Jesus, who could quote Psalms even from the cross, would have known this psalm as well, Psalm 8. Here our poet offers the heavens for our consideration. He can imagine nothing greater or more vast, than the mysterious moon and the innumerable stars. And God made these great things—not by an act of will or even of His hands—but by His fingers.

The Psalmist’s strategy here is to close the infinite distance between God and humankind by confounding all notions of scale. If the heavens are the work of God’s fingers, what is a mortal like you and me? But the poet answers his own question by stating that human beings are crowned with honor and glory. Because God has bent down and conferred such dignity to us, we participate in a higher order, like that of angels.

Everywhere Scripture concedes that human beings are foolish, yes; guilty, weak, and rebellious, yes; sad, confused, fearful, and forever insecure in this created world. So where is our dignity? Surely it is that God is mindful of us, that God visits us. Who are we, that God should pay attention to us, be intrigued or enchanted by us, be loyal to us, forgiving of us? We should not be surprised then, when John insists that God is love, or that Jesus would call us “friends.”

The earliest Christian communities did not celebrate Easter—at least not as a stand-alone holy day. Those first Christians began worshipping on the first day of the week, Sunday, because that was the day that Christ was risen. So every time they gathered, it was Easter, the day of resurrection.

They gathered in the evening because Sunday was a working day. Work began at sunrise and lasted until twilight, when the sun was beginning to go down. They gathered in homes or in cemeteries and catacombs—secret places where no Roman authorities would think to look, so they could worship in peace. And when Christianity was legalized and Christians could build churches, they began by building in the style of Roman tombs and mausoleums. They gathered in an empty tomb, and then were sent out to be Christ’s Living Body for the sake of the world.

We are so lonely for one another; but that loneliness points to an even more fervent longing. We sense God’s absence. That absence is in our long, sleepless nights, in our fearful hearts, in our unanswered prayers. Yet these things don’t keep us from seeking God, but draw us, again and again, to seek the presence we have been missing. Absence is not the same thing as emptiness. It is not nothing. Absence is something: a heightened awareness, a sharpened appetite, a finer perception. When someone important is absent from me, it becomes clearer than ever what that person means to me. Details that got lost in our togetherness are recalled when we are apart. I see the virtues I took for granted, opportunities I have missed. The quirks that drove me crazy from close range are endearing from a distance. From this enlarged perspective, I can see the very things that make my someone *some one*, and not just anyone.

C.S. Lewis once argued that love is most fully realized when what we desire is most out of reach. Because perfect love is unattainable, we are drawn to it. And nothing is so unattainable as God; nothing more out of reach. Yet nothing evokes our love more strongly. God is the elusive one, at the heart of our very being, the One who promises to give according to our capacity to release. We love and are loved by God in the act of relinquishing every guarantee of love. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That absence gives way to a wild and joyous freedom that comes rumbling up from the depths of the soul as an utter mystery—the dark, and inexplicable mystery of love.

You and I live our lives between the judgment and mercy of God. Most of the time, we don’t recognize this because our lives are so, well, so ordinary. But in the midst of a crisis like this pandemic, judgment and mercy put before us every day. We can see them, sometimes. We

have the most trouble with God's judgment, I fear. When we see signs of judgment, we tend to interpret them through our own eyes, calling it God's judgment when it really is just my prejudice, my bias, the sort of judgment I'd pronounce if I were a god. We do a little better identifying mercy, because—well because I think Calvin is correct—we cannot err by attributing too much grace and mercy to God.

Today, from inside this empty tomb of a church, we are invited not to see beyond this world. The miracle is here, among us. The risen Christ appears to his friends, and I suspect one reason they don't recognize him is that he looks so ordinary. They expect him to shine like the sun, but here he is, walking and talking beside them on the road to Emmaus. Here he is, waving and crying a simple "Hi! How are you doing? I've missed seeing you." Here he is, making a fire, and cooking breakfast for them because the ordinary risen Christ always seems to be hungry. Here he is, dressed like a common gardener—a gardener who can wipe away every tear and fulfill the promise of abundant, eternal life.

"I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said." It is the strong, abiding presence of the risen Christ that we celebrate today. Our sanctuary, like the tomb, is empty, and yet, that is cause for hope, because what God has done through dead Jesus is what God wants to do through the likes of you and me. It is what God will keep doing through you and me, if only we let Him. For all the holiness that was concentrated in Jesus of Nazareth, has come to life in all the fields of earth. So let us cultivate such holiness in our lives. Amen.