

Rev. Lisa Schrott
April 17, 2022 Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18
The Promise of the Empty Tomb

It is a haunting story that we heard on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. A story of betrayal, abandonment, suffering and death. The darkest day. After his death on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with spices in linen cloths, according to the Jewish burial customs. There was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so they laid Jesus there.”¹ But the story is not over. Hear now the promise of the empty tomb from the Gospel of John.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her. **This is the Word of the Lord.**
Thanks be to God.

¹ John 19:40-42

*Joy, beautiful spark of Divinity*². So opens the English translation of the German poem *An die Freude – Ode to Joy* by Friedrich Schiller. Beethoven set Schiller's poem to music as the fourth movement of his Ninth Symphony. In her recent article in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, the Rev. Katy Shevel, shares author Harvey Sachs description of this symphony. He describes the first movement as "brutality and despair," the second movement as "harsh struggle," and the third movement as "acceptance of life as it is." Shevel relates that in the journey through Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the listener experiences a "harrowing of hell" and emerges out the other side to the fourth and final movement, a euphoric choral celebration. At last, the soaring voices singing Schiller's text, as what Beethoven wants us to experience now is all-embracing joy."³

We have just experienced that all-embracing joy from our youth instrumentalists, after experiencing the brutality and despair and struggle of Holy Week. Now if the words I quoted from Schiller didn't sound familiar to you, you are not alone. Many – maybe all of us - are more familiar with the words of the hymn written by Presbyterian minister Henry van Dyke:

*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee, Op'ning to the sun above.*⁴

It is the music that best expresses the emotions of Holy Week – from the sorrowful *Behold A Sight* that the choir sang on Maundy Thursday, to the stirring *Sacred Head Now Wounded* played by the handbells and the haunting *Where You There* that Doug Paterson sang a cappella on Good Friday to the incredible joy of Easter: the soaring chords of *Jesus Christ is Risen Today* - organ, bells, and brass leading the way, to the jubilant *Hallelujah Chorus* which will send us out to share the good news to the world.

And yet when I imagine Mary entering the empty tomb on the morning so long ago, I imagine the silence. The silence of the early morning – still dark outside – a hint to the east that the sun would soon rise, the air heavy with dew. Mary silently making her way down the path. She gets to the tomb and finds the stone rolled back. I imagine her emotions run the gamut - fear, terror, and amazement washing over her-the neurons in the emotional centers of her brain firing so rapidly that they cannot process what her senses are telling her. I imagine it a little like the control center in the Pixar animated movie *Inside Out*. Sadness was at the helm and then Fear pushes her out of the way and grabs the handle. Anger maybe trying to edge his way in as well, as Mary realizes the tomb has been opened and Jesus' body no longer lays there. And Joy – joy is nowhere to be found in that initial scene. Fear has pushed her to the side and she is gone. So Mary runs to tell Peter and the beloved disciple about the empty tomb.

² The words to Schiller's poem can be found here: <https://www.saxonica.com/~mike/OdeToJoy.html>

³ Katy Shevel. "Ode to Joy" and the Harrowing of Hell. *Presbyterian Outlook* April 14, 2022. Available online at: <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/04/ode-to-joy-and-the-harrowing-of-hell/>

⁴ Words by Henry van Dyke. *Glory to God Hymnal* #611; Westminster John Knox Press, 2013

How did Mary and the two disciples respond to the news of the empty tomb? How do we respond to the news of the empty tomb? Are we like Peter – running as fast as we can – but not quite fast enough to get there first and then pushing our way in? This is the same Peter who just denied knowing Jesus after his arrest. Maybe he is trying to make up for his bad behavior – feeling guilty for denying the place Jesus held in his life. Or maybe he was slow on the uptake and he finally understood, finally got what Jesus meant when he said that he was the resurrection and the life; that whoever believes in him would have life eternal. Maybe we are like Peter and the empty tomb holds the promise for us of another try at believing the good news. Believing that we are forgiven for our doubts; forgiven for worrying more about what others think about us than being true to Jesus' call in our lives; forgiven for living with the expectations of others guiding our life rather than listening to voice of the Holy Spirit. Yes, forgiveness is the promise of the empty tomb.

Or maybe we are more like the beloved disciple John. The beloved disciple races to the tomb and gets there first, but he doesn't enter until after Peter goes in. And when he enters the empty tomb we hear that he saw and he believed. Even though he did not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead, the beloved disciple **believed** the promise of the empty tomb. And maybe that is where we are this Easter morning—not quite sure we understand – or pretty sure we don't understand - all of this death on a cross and resurrection stuff, and yet we know in our hearts we are part of a bigger story. We believe that there is more to life than what we can see with our eyes and prove with historical or archeological or scientific facts. Maybe we are tired of trying to make sense of a world that frankly too often doesn't make a lot sense. And we want to confidently live as a people of faith, believing in the promise of the empty tomb.

Or maybe it is Mary's story that rings true for us. Peter and the beloved disciple run home after they realize the tomb is empty. And Mary stays on, weeping – her heart broken that the body of her dear friend is gone. Weeping because that is what one does when the world around you has gone mad and the world you are living in today bears no resemblance to your life last month or even last week. When she finally cleared her tears enough to look into the tomb, she can't make sense of the two angels and mistakes the one who speaks to her – she mistakes her beloved Jesus for the gardener. And when Jesus calls her name, she does the only thing she can, she returns the call – and speaks his name of honor – Rabbouni – or teacher – an indication of the relationship she has with Jesus. The promise of the empty tomb for Mary is the confirmation of a relationship – a personal relationship with her savior. And maybe that is the promise of the empty tomb for us. A reminder – a confirmation – that Jesus knows us so intimately that he calls us by name. And that we can call his name back. The promise of a relationship that does not end with earthly death, but stretches into life eternal. This, too, is the promise of the empty tomb.

For Peter, for the beloved disciple, for Mary – the empty tomb was a promise of a life transformed. Their old story had to now be transformed into the story of the new possible. It

meant accepting that the concrete death and burial of Jesus that they saw with their own eyes was transformed into something to which they could not even speak. It meant claiming something that they did not understand, could not articulate, and caused them to shake in their very sandals, was going to turn their world upside down and inside out.

And how do we respond to the promise of the empty tomb? How do we respond when our most carefully laid plans are turned upside down, when we lose control –or the illusion of control – of the world around us. Will it be a bold and courageous response of love – love towards not just our family and friends, but to all of God’s children?

Easter comes as an overwhelming assurance that a new creation has begun — and in the end, love and justice, shalom and joy, will have the final word. What does the empty tomb – the risen Christ promise for us? It is a promise that despair and fear have been transformed by love. In our world today we are gripped by so many fears. For you who despair in the midst of pain and distress — fear not. You are not alone: Jesus understands your suffering and is your companion in suffering. For you who despair that the power of death has the upper hand — fear not. Easter means Jesus is and will continue to be victorious over the powers of death. For you who feel isolated and lonely — fear not. Easter means we are all together in the risen Body of Christ, even if we’re physically unable to gather together. For you who despair that your sin is too great for God to forgive — fear not. Easter is the story of grace – of amazing grace for God has cleared all accounts, liberating humanity from shame, reconciling us to God and each other as God’s children.

Friends, fear has been transformed into victory, fear has been transformed in to community, fear has been transformed into the joy of reconciliation – the joy of reconciliation with God and with each other. This is the promise of the empty tomb. Each of us is given a choice of how we respond to the promise - to respond in faith or in despair; to respond in fear or joy. To focus on hurts and wrongs or to embrace love and grace – the love and grace we receive from our Savior Jesus Christ.

In a few minutes we will come to the table and dine with our host Jesus. A few nights ago we commemorated the Last Supper that Jesus ate with his disciples – that last supper before the cross. We remember that after his resurrection, the disciples recognized Jesus when he invited them to break bread with him. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, the Rev. Rowan Williams, reminds us to look at communion through the lens of resurrection. He says, “...the starting point must be where the apostles themselves began, eating and drinking with him after he was raised from the dead, experiencing once and again his call into a new level of life together, a new fellowship and solidarity, and a new willingness and capacity to be welcomers themselves.”⁵ This is the promise of the empty tomb– we are welcomed to the table dine with Jesus and we are invited to recognize the risen Christ. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

⁵ Rowan Williams. *Being Christian. Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*. William B. Eerdmans; 2014, p45-46