

# “The Empty Tomb”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 4, 2021*

Easter Sunday

Psalm 118:15-17, 21-24

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 24:1-12

At the start of Luke’s telling of the empty tomb, a group of faithful female disciples – later named as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and “other women” – go to the grave with spices they have prepared to pay their respects. They have a job to do; something they have likely done many times before. Yet, to their great surprise, they discover that the stone has been rolled away and they do not find the body. Jesus is absent. Then the “men in dazzling clothes” show up and ask, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

It seems like a rhetorical question, but the answer is that they are *not* looking for the living among the dead. They are looking for a dead body; which is a reasonable thing to do. Tending to the dead is considered a truly good deed in the Jewish faith – the greatest of all *mitzvahs* – because the dead cannot repay this kindness offered to them.<sup>1</sup>

This year, we have all been tending to the dead: those who have lost loved ones, those who are sick, those who are isolated and alone, those seeking to honor victims of violence and injustice. We have been wearing masks, volunteering at vaccine clinics and getting our shots. We have been looking for ways to be kind and generous; and tending to our beloved in the best ways we know how.

In Luke’s telling of the Easter story, the men and the women have very different reactions to the news that Jesus is again among the living; the women react with fear at first but come to understand correctly that Jesus’ absence from the tomb means that he is present on earth again. They are called to remember what Jesus had told them while he was with them; that he must come to Jerusalem where he would be arrested and killed; but would rise again to new life.

When the women come back from the cemetery on Easter morning, they brought with them astonishing news of the empty tomb. But to the men, these words seem like an “idle tale,” a foolish yarn, utter nonsense. The irony should not

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

be lost on us that it's the eleven disciples, the ones who remained idle that morning – and not the women who set out at early dawn to do the necessary work – that call the report nonsense. They misunderstand the empty tomb and the missing body; thinking it represents only absence and loss.

The gender of the speakers may be part of the reason for the disciples' indifference – for, according to the law of that time, the testimony of women was not binding – but not the whole reason. After all, the women were confirming a message that Jesus himself has already told them before entering Jerusalem. When the women came racing back with the news that these words had come to pass, the disciples maybe should have been prepared, eager, receptive, believing.

The women's remembering is both a recalling of Jesus' earlier teachings and a way to re-member this broken body of believers; a community that had been dis-membered – torn apart – by fear, confusion, grief and distress.

As people of faith, as people who try our best to believe, remembering is essential. Jesus regularly practiced the festivals of his Jewish faith that recounted stories of scripture, including Passover: the remembrance of the Israelite's escape from Egypt. It was at a Passover table that Jesus spoke the words that Christians today hear when we come to celebrate communion: “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Remember. Like what we do here, in worship. It seems like a simple thing: reading words from scripture, telling stories, sharing prayers and burdens, giving each other blessings and offering peace. We help each other remember.

Because when we are living real lives: lives when we get scared, isolated, confused, and exhausted it is all too easy to forget. Easy to forget even the most central things: that God is good, that we are loved, that light shines in the darkness, that life has defeated death.

Even when we find ourselves in front of the empty tomb, as we are today, it can be hard to remember. So, we help one another – both to recall and to reconnect; to speak words of life to one another and to help mend fractured relationships and frazzled faiths. We can be, for one another, the re-memberers.

Perhaps, then, faith is not just a matter of knowledge but of the courage to believe the unbelievable, to believe that life can emerge even from the tomb, to trust the words Jesus have spoken though they made little sense then and are still confounding now.

For, believing in the resurrection is not a matter of mental effort. Belief does not dwell in the space between our ears. The good news becomes life in our hearts, in our souls, in our very bones. Belief in the resurrection changes our very existence.<sup>2</sup>

On this Easter morning, I give thanks to God for the example of the women who go to the tomb. After pausing to respect the Sabbath, they get right to the sacred work of tending to the dead; and then, without delay, reporting back to the disciples all that they had seen. Everything: the scary parts, the comforting message, the hope of light piercing through the darkness.

And I give thanks that I have you – the people of the church, all of you – with whom I can gather to remember. Let us remember together. Let us remind each other. Jesus is risen!

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<sup>2</sup> Joana Harderer, *Spacious Faith*