

Looking a Little Deeper

John 20:1-10
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In his internet post titled “Come and Get It,” the Rev. Dr. Ozzie Smith, Jr. remembers a time his father-in-law helped him see things from a different perspective.

“He showed me a sheet of white paper,” says Smith, “and he took his pen and drew a small dot on that paper.... Then he handed it back to me and said, “What do you see?”

I said, “Well, I see a dot.” He said, “Boy, you missed the whole sheet of paper.”

“How?” I said. He said, “You focused on the dot and missed the whole sheet.”

Hearing this morning’s Easter story once again from the Gospel According to John, there’s a lot to focus on – it’s the first day of the week, the tomb is empty, Peter outruns John, one of them goes in and the other does not, and the only thing they find there are the linen wrappings.

Those are the details thus far, right? When it comes to the Easter Story, if we were to stop there, we’d miss what comes next, right? We’d miss the Risen Lord interacting with his disciples.

And yet, if we rush to what’s next, we miss what’s available to us only if we linger a bit at the Empty Tomb. So let’s do that. Let’s take some time this Easter looking more carefully at the Empty Tomb, what it can reveal to us, what part it plays in the good news of Easter, when we take the time to look a little deeper.

For instance, yes, it was the first day of the week, and John tells us, it was still dark. When Mary Magdalene reached the tomb, it was still dark outside. Why does John tell us that? There’s nothing about it being dark that’s important to the rest of the story. No, there must be a reason John reports this.

Well, it’s because John knows that without Jesus, the world is a dark place. This tells us that wherever we see spiritual light, that’s where we’ll find Jesus. It’s our job to shine light on those moments, not let them go unnoticed.

Doing that – looking for Jesus and being bold enough to simply say, “That’s a God thing, isn’t it?” or “The Lord must have had a hand in that, don’t you think?” – saying that can make all the difference in the world, when it comes to helping people see the light of Christ and discover the blessings of the Lord.

Did you notice that those statements I proposed both end in a question mark – “That’s a God thing, isn’t it?” “The Lord must have had a hand in that, don’t you think?” Being curious about our faith and what others think, believe and experience – that’s important. If we don’t stop to listen for how others see things, we can’t hope to help them see Jesus more clearly.

This world is full of wrong-headed thinking – ours and that of others. When Mary Magdalene ran off to Peter and John saying, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb...,” she couldn’t have been more wrong. Nobody took Jesus.

Mary got it wrong, just like we sometimes get it wrong; just like sometimes it’s the other person who has it wrong. The only way to land on the truth is to look at things from each other’s perspective. That’s how we discern what’s what and come to agreement on it.

Take for example the symphony hall usher who saw some guy laying there sprawled out across three seats of the theater and immediately he had it all figured out. Starting out tactfully, he said, “Sorry, sir, but you’re only allowed one seat.”

When the man groaned and refused to budge, the usher got impatient. “Sir, if you don’t get up, I’m going to have to call the manager.”

Again, the man just groaned, so the usher marched up the aisle to get the manager. The two of them returned and tried repeatedly to get the man to move, but with no success. Finally, they called the police.

The cop came in, took one look at the guy laying there and said, “All right, buddy, what’s your name?”

“Sam,” the man groaned. “Where ya from, Sam?” asked the cop. It took a moment, but eventually Sam looked up with a pained face and said, “The balcony.”

Too often, we think we’ve got it all figured out, when the truth is we just might have it all wrong.

If Mary hadn’t been open to reconsidering what she thought about the Empty Tomb, she would have missed the Risen Lord. So, don’t be afraid to question your conclusions, and prayerfully consider other points of view, with others of good conscience. If we all did that, the world would be a much better place, a more peaceful place. That’s the promise of Easter.

Another thing to notice from the Empty Tomb is that John “saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.” John was afraid to go in.

The world is a scary place. Lots of dark places we're afraid to go, uncomfortable subjects we're afraid to talk about, risky moves we're afraid to make. And all this fear and uncertainty can keep us from moving forward, from seeing what's possible when we step out in faith.

If John had not followed Peter into the Tomb, he would not have believed. Sometimes the truth is found on the other side of our actions. We have to act our way into faith, rather than wait to have faith and courage to act.

Maybe there's something you're hesitating to do right now, a change or move that could make things better. Whatever it is that's troubling you or causing friction and upset. Whatever it is that's holding you back, pray about it. Share it with others. And if the Lord is telling you to go forward, make that move and see if things don't get better. That's the promise of Easter, a more joyous and blessed life when we trust in the Lord.

After John overcame his hesitancy to go a little deeper, to look closer at the Empty Tomb, he actually found that it was not empty at all. Both Peter and John see "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."

Now think about it. If someone took Jesus out of the tomb as Mary first believed, why would they take time to unwrap his body, let alone fold up the head cloth? No, it's clear something amazing happened in that tomb.

Likewise in our world, whenever you see things turning from disorder – linen wrappings tossed aside – to order – the head cloth folded neatly – that's a sign that something amazing is happening. That's a sign that the Lord is at work, setting things right, setting things straight.

As followers of Jesus we are called to set things straight – "make straight the way of the Lord," as Isaiah declares about the coming of Jesus.

If there's something that's not quite right in your life, if you see something not quite right in the world, the Lord is here to help you set things straight, to make things right, when you take a deeper look at your life and at our world. That's the promise of Easter – that through Christ, we can make things better.

So you see, there's more to the Empty Tomb than emptiness. This is something that Peter and John and Mary and all the disciples came to realize as they came together in faith and met the Risen Lord.

And so it is with us. When we come together in the faith before the Lord, the Empty Tomb becomes the promise and assurance this world needs. Through the Empty Tomb we see

the importance of keeping the faith and staying connected; we see the bright, new future that the Lord has laid out for us; we see the possibility and promise of stepping out in faith; the value and importance of being open to new ideas and practices; and we see the light of Jesus shining in the darkness, shining all the brighter for those who take the time to go a little deeper. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We gather, O God, in your presence to rejoice in the light of the empty tomb. The stone has been rolled away both from the mouth of the tomb and from the depths of our hearts.

We have learned to live in the power of the risen Christ. We have grown daily in the presence of our risen Savior.

Some folks, however, have joined us today after a long winter of the soul. We have struggled to breathe in the chill wind of adversity. We have been unable to grow anything in the barren fields of doubt and fear. We have trembled and shivered as we have struggled to sense the warmth of your love.

We come to the empty tomb with an expectant hope in our hearts and the prayer of faith on our lips. We are confident that you are about to do a new thing, O God. We believe that the stone which we struggle to move ourselves, is about to be blown out of its ruts.

We pray that the struggles of those dealing with illness, injury and other health problems be eased and the way be cleared to restored health, comfort and strength. For them and for us, we look for an encounter with the Risen Christ, and to that end, we bow in worship, and we worship in wonder, and we wonder in faith, and we have faith, faith in you, O Lord, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.