

Empty Tomb, Full Life

John 20:1-10
April, 17, 2022

First Presbyterian Church
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Easter is a time when we gather at church to bask in the glory of the Risen Lord. I recently heard a devotional written by Marci Alborghetti that shines light on the Lord's triumph over the darkness of this world. I'd like to share it with you now.

THE SIXTH DAY: *TUESDAY*

FROM MANGER TO CROSS

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “. . . and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”
—Luke 2:34–35 (NRSV)

One of my Lenten lessons this year came right after Christmas. Our neighbor in New London, Connecticut, assembled a glorious outdoor crèche with carved figures standing and kneeling on straw in a wooden stable. A strategically placed spotlight revealed the figures' expressions and positions. They are poor folk, from the weary parents to the ragged, adoring shepherds.

A few days after Christmas, we were hit by a nor'easter. The spotlight illuminated the crèche while the snow flew and the wind howled. When I looked outside, drifting snow had covered the figure of Baby Jesus. Goose bumps rose on my arms. There was something about the scene that disturbed me; I was seeing a preview of what was to come. The rejoicing of this birthday would lead to glory and grief.

Then I noticed that the figures around the manger appeared different, now that the baby was covered with snow. Their faces, especially Mary's and Joseph's, looked stunned and sorrowful. The angel no longer seemed to be radiantly singing praises but grimly keeping vigil. The shepherds' awe wasn't joyous astonishment but amazement that such a sacrifice would be made for them. Even the animals seemed to cower in grief.

Later that Christmas week, the sun came out and melted the snow on the manger. And at the end of His painful journey, the Son Himself will rise and melt the ice around our grieving hearts.

Father, my heart cries out in joy at Your wondrous gift and in sorrow at Your wrenching sacrifice. —Marci Alborghetti

Digging Deeper: *Isaiah 53:5; Philippians 3:10–11*

That's what we celebrate today – the triumph of the Risen Lord, shining light and spreading warmth to melt away all the grief, all the pain, and all the struggle all around us.

We see this on that first Easter morning long, long ago, when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb of Jesus overcome with grief, heartache and doubt. She finds the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, and says to Peter and John, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Can you imagine looking for Jesus in your hour of need and not finding any sign of him? I think we all can. The cold, icy reality of this world has fallen heavy upon so many people in recent years, months, days.

And search as we might, it is only faith that offers hope of brighter days to come – for the people of Ukraine, for our friends and loved ones battling illness and disease, for those struggling to make ends meet, for the beloved Kingdom that God is ushering in through Jesus, our Risen Lord.

Where do we find signs of such hope today? For the earliest disciples, their first sign of hope was an empty tomb – an empty tomb and little else. Peter and John hear from Mary that the tomb is empty, that somebody has taken away the Lord's body and they can't believe what they're hearing. So they set off running. John outruns Peter and reaches the tomb first. He sees the linen wrappings inside, but does not go in. John's not sure what's going on. There's an emptiness, an emptiness in his life. First the loss of Jesus and now the loss of his body, the violation of all that is holy.

What happens in this world when there's an emptiness like that, a void just begging to be filled? Something fills it, right? The problem is, if we're not careful and purposeful in filling any emptiness we face, things don't go very well. Any information void these days gets filled with fake news; those with too much time on their hands end up finding trouble just around the corner; when we get too hungry we fill up on things that aren't good for us; if we don't find a higher purpose in life, we end up wasting away our days.

Take for instance the woman who had an empty spot in her weekly schedule. She decided to fill it by taking an aerobics class for seniors. "I bent, twisted, gyrated, jumped up and down, and perspired for an hour," she said. "But by the time I got my leotards on, the class was over."

When we're not careful and purposeful in filling any emptiness in life, things don't go so well. Truth be told, it takes a thoughtful and faithful approach to life to make any real difference in the world.

And the world needs us to make a difference, it needs us to show others what life is really about – not emptiness but rather the fullness of knowing and loving the Lord, of finding hope in him, hope for our lives and for this world.

There wasn't anything to be found in that empty tomb except hope, hope that the promise and power of Jesus is real. Jesus promised his disciples that he would rise triumphant on the third day. And he left signs of his resurrection promise and power for them to find.

When Peter reaches the tomb, he rushes inside and sees the same linen wrappings that John saw. But since Peter went a little farther, he sees something more – he sees the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.

Jesus left us that as a sign of his care and purpose. Jesus took care to roll up that cloth, and then he placed it purposefully where it would be found, seen by anyone who bothered to look, anyone brave enough to search for Jesus amid those empty places in our lives.

The Risen Lord is not found in the tomb; he's found in the world, where Mary sees him in a nearby garden, when the disciples see him on the road to Emmaus, where the apostles see him in the fellowship of the Upper Room and the beauty of the lakeshore.

Jesus is not to be found in an empty tomb; he's found in the fullness of life, the fullness of your life, a life of meaning and purpose, a life of forgiveness received and shared, a life that shines light upon the darkness all around us, a life made new each day, as you awake to a fresh start filled with the hope and purpose of a life lived for and with the Risen Lord. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

What a beautiful day for celebrating! We are so grateful, O God, for the promise that this day holds. We are filled with hope and joy and life.

Thank you for loving us so much that you sent your only son to die for us. Thank you also that death was not the final word.

It is only through this miracle that we can live in anticipation of a world where sin and darkness no longer exists. We wait in anticipation for your return and the final defeat of sin and death.

We praise you, O God, for the great story you are writing on our hearts, in our lives, and through our ministry to one another.

We pray for those who are grieving, those struggling with illness and disease, those facing surgery and those recuperating. We pray all this in the name of the Risen Lord, who gave to us words of prayer that we might 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.**