

## “The Empty Tomb”

April 12, 2009

John 20:1-18

Easter could not have arrived soon enough this year. We are mired in gloomy news: the global economy is crippled, God’s creation is under assault, wars drag on endlessly, poverty keeps spreading, deadly diseases go unchecked, and fear and despair multiply. If ever we needed an infusion of hope, if ever we needed a strong shot of joy, now’s the time. And Easter delivers.

Easter is not a Disney tale of make believe or a Spielberg saga of escapist entertainment. Easter is the story of why we can live our lives with hope and joy, despite the harsh realities life can hurl our way.

We live our lives in the present; moment by moment. Yet, none of us live *only* in the present. We have a past, and more importantly, we carry in our heads and in our hearts, a vision of the future. Writer, Parker Palmer reminds us that “The quality of our lives depends on whether we see a horizon that is dark with death or full of light and life. (If we only) imagine ourselves moving toward the finality of death, we can become driven by fear...but if we envision a horizon that is hopeful and full of life, then we are free to live without fear. We are free to act with love and trust.”<sup>1</sup> We are free to dream of new possibilities and embark on new adventures.

A colleague tells of reading a powerful poem by Louise Glück, called “October.” She “contemplates the season of autumn and the gradual, day-by-day dimming of light. Her poem is about cold winds and changing leaves, but is also about us, for we cannot escape the eventual fading of the light. In stark terms, she writes, ‘You will not be spared, nor will what you love be spared.’ When my colleague first read those words, he had a physical reaction to them. A sharp pain squeezed his forehead, and he began to weep. He wept because these words are undeniably true, and he wept because he despises their truth.”<sup>2</sup>

The crucifixion of Jesus screamed this fact at his followers. The one they loved and the one who loved them, would not be spared. The one who taught them with unsurpassed wisdom, the one who brought healing to people in distress, the one who boosted the spirits of those shoved to the margins of society, the one who had the courage to confront those who were unjust, even he would not be spared.

On that dark Friday afternoon, when Jesus was nailed to the cross, as his life drained out of him, hope drained out of his followers. Earlier, when they had committed to following Jesus, the disciples experience a depth of living unlike anything they had ever known. Their lives were filled with purpose and the future appeared beautiful. Before they encountered Jesus, they had come to accept the trials of their lives as their fate; once they became his followers they envisioned new possibilities. Before they encountered Jesus, they thought there was nothing new under the sun; once they became his followers they began to believe that nothing was impossible. But when they reached Jerusalem, the dark powers of the world seized Jesus and silenced him; or so they thought.

According to the Gospel of John, before sunrise on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, brokenhearted, shuffled her way to the tomb. When she arrived, the stone had been removed from the entrance. Did her heart immediately leap with hope? Hardly. She dashed off to Peter and the other disciple to tell them that body of Jesus had been stolen.

On receiving this news, the two disciples took off as if a starting gun had been fired. The gospel writer even adds the peculiar detail that after running neck and neck, the other disciple outraced Peter to the tomb.

The disciples entered the small cavern and spotted the linen wrappings, but just as Mary had said, no corpse. They were baffled by what they found. After awhile, they left the tomb and

wandered back to where they were hiding. However, Mary lingered, weeping over the death of her master and this last infuriating insult someone had inflicted by snatching his body.

We identify with Mary because we too know about death and how the people we love are not spared. And if this were the final truth, then the losses we experience in life would drive us to cynicism, bitterness and despair. But death is not the ultimate truth. That is what Easter proclaims. And that is what Mary discovered on that first Easter morning.

After finding an empty tomb, she encountered the risen Christ. For some reason, she did not recognize him immediately. Jesus spoke to her, but initially, she thought he was the gardener. However, when he called her name, he broke through her fog and she realized who it was. She wanted to throw her arms around his neck and cling to him, but he instructed her to go and tell the disciples. She did, but they did not believe her. They had to experience the risen Christ for themselves.

Exactly what happened during those first few days after Jesus was crucified is unclear. But what we do know is this: Something powerful happened. Something jolted all of the disciples, transforming them from frightened men cowering behind locked doors, into courageous believers eager to stake their lives on the resurrection of Christ. People who were despairing were suddenly filled with hope and joy.

The letters of the Apostle Paul were written 20 years after the crucifixion, several years before the gospels, and Paul is so convinced of the resurrection that he says, "If there is no resurrection, then there is no basis for faith in Christ." If there is no resurrection, don't even bother.

Paul encountered a number of skeptics, so in his letter to the church in Corinth, he said that they did not have to take his word for it, they could speak to some of the people who saw the risen Christ. He tells them that shortly after the crucifixion, Jesus not only appeared to the disciples, he also appeared to a group of 500. Paul said that some of those people had died, but most of them were still alive. In other words, "A lot of people who saw the risen Christ are still around. Go talk to them."

Twenty centuries later, we do not have that opportunity. Our advantage is that we witness the impact of the resurrection on world history. And the fact is that "No human on earth has influenced and shaped the history of the world from antiquity down to the present day, more than Jesus."<sup>3</sup> And it is belief in the resurrection that has enabled millions of people to face death with courage, certain that our earthly existence is not all there is.

A few years ago, Tom Long lost a good friend to breast cancer. Two weeks before she died, her pastor visited her. She said to her pastor, "I've been reading the Book of James, and it says 'if anyone is sick, call for the elders in the church to come pray with them and anoint them with oil.' I want you to bring some of the elders from the Session over here to pray with me and anoint me with oil."

There was a moment of awkward silence and then the pastor said, "Well, I don't know about that."

"Why not?" she said.

"That sounds to me as if you might be expecting some kind of magic."

She snapped at him, "Listen, I'm going to die. I have maybe a week, maybe a month, but I'm about to die."

The pastor asked, "Then why do you want me to bring the elders over here to anoint you with oil?"

She said, “Because it would be a sign, that even as time is running out for me, the promises of God never run out. It would be a sign, that even as my life is ebbing away, I am being held by eternal arms that will never let me go.”<sup>4</sup>

The resurrection declares that we can trust our Creator to transform us into another mode of existence when we come to the final chapter of our earthly adventure – a transformation that is far grander than our small minds can grasp. And yet, the resurrection not only gives us hope for new life after we die, it also infuses us with hope for events in this world so that we can live a rich life despite the losses we face. The resurrection trumpets that God is a God of hope who will never tire in leading us to a better day.

Hope is the inner engine that keeps us moving forward when things are at their worst, when the future looks dismal, when a better day seems impossible. Hope is what motivates us to keep going after the doctor has said “I’m sorry, but you have cancer.” Hope is what compels us to crawl out of bed and keep looking for a job after months of dead ends. Hope is what drives us to keep fighting for a just cause in the face of overwhelming odds. Hope is what inspires us to keep living, loving and laughing even after a precious loved one is gone.

Hope is what enables us to say, “I’m looking forward to...I can’t wait until... Won’t it be great when...?”

Hope may be the most powerful asset we can ever possess. It can inspire us to keep going when all seems lost and it can convince us that there is still a way even when there seems to be no way. And sometimes, hope can even be the factor that makes the difference between life and death.

There was a woman who tutored students who became hospitalized. One day she got a call from a classroom teacher who asked her to call on a young boy from her class who was in the hospital to help him with his homework. The classroom teacher said, “We are studying nouns and adverbs. I hope you can help him.”

When the tutor arrived at the hospital, she was dismayed to discover that the boy was in the burn unit. He was in critical condition and in great pain. When she walked into the room and saw him in such misery, she felt awkward about her assignment, but she decided to press on and stumbled through the lesson. As she walked out of the room she felt ashamed of herself for putting him through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning one of the nurses who worked on the burn unit saw the tutor in the hallway and said to her, “What did you do to that boy yesterday?” Before the tutor could get out her apology, the nurse said, “We’d given up on him, but since your visit, he has started fighting back and he’s responding to the treatment.”

Sometime later the boy explained that he had given up hope. But all that changed when he came to a simple realization. He said, “I knew nobody would send a tutor to work on nouns and adverbs with a boy who was going to die.”<sup>5</sup>

Easter proclaims that hope has been let loose in the world. Death tries to snuff out hope and death tries to smother joy, but the God of resurrection wins the day. Jesus walked through the valley of the shadow of death, but he did not remain there. God resurrected him to new life and promises the same for us. Because he lives, we live; may we always live with hope and joy.

## NOTES

1. Joanna Adams, quoting Parker Palmer in “The Great Defeat,” April 23, 2000.
2. Scott Black Johnston, “Deadly Things” on *Day 1* website for April 12, 2009.
3. Martin Hengel, *Atonement*, (SCM Press, 1981), p.1.

4. Tom Long, "Telling Time" at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta on February 8, 2009.
5. Joanna Adams, "Good News Indeed," April 20, 2003, quoting Joyce Hollyday in *Sojourners*.