

Empty Tomb or Risen Lord
Scripture Lessons: Colossians 3:1-4, John 20:1-18

We are really not so far away from that first Sunday morning. We are really not so different from those first followers.

We have listened to Jesus and tried to understand. But what Christ has said is just beyond our faith to believe and to commit; what he has done is just beyond our courage to leave behind our old ways and comforts.

We are really not so different from most of the followers of all the ages. We have no trouble believing that the tomb is empty. We go running to see what and who in the name of evil have added insult to the injury of sacrificing love and innocent goodness. They keep crucifying the one we call Teacher and Lord.

We are like those followers peeking into the tomb to find it empty. The last thing on our minds is that the impossible can happen. Dead bodies don't disappear by themselves. Someone has come to steal the body. Someone wants to seal the victory of realistic doubt over idealistic delusion.

We are like John and Peter. We can say the tomb was empty because it was. Anyone can say that. We don't know how it got that way, but we have an idea that the cause is connected to not-so-good Friday and the cross.

We can be honest in this sanctuary when we can be honest no where else – even on a Resurrection Sunday.

The skeptics of the ages have believed in Jesus, but needed to find some way to explain away an empty tomb. The Romans or the religious powers like the Pharisees stole the body to seal their victory and guarantee the end of the movement. Some other secret group of Jesus' followers stole the body to perpetuate the movement and keep faith alive. Or tragically, the followers were so overcome with grief that faith turned into delusion and denial; they never saw what was so obvious before their eyes.

We are here. We are not like them. We are not really skeptics. We won't go that far. But in a world that now knows so much more about the world than they ever could have known, we search for other answers to an empty tomb. We just have our doubts about the impossible. We can believe that the tomb was empty - anyone can. But dead bodies disappearing into any kind of living is pushing faith way past faith. We don't know what happened, but we know the limits of what could happen. We keep wanting an explanation of the resurrection we can live with.

Still, with all the modern question about a resurrection, we are here to say that we believe in Christ, trust Christ, follow Christ even when we are not sure what happened with a resurrection. Like scripture says, "we believe; help our unbelief." We trust, help us to trust with all we have and are.

But how much are we really like the followers? How many of us will go home after singing the Alleluias, saying the Creed, repeating the worship of Easter and Spring. ...and return to a world that is pretty much the way it was last week. Will we will get ready for Monday pretty much the way we did last Monday?

John and Peter saw that the tomb was empty, and went back to their homes. How many of us will say Alleluia and sing the songs about the empty tomb today – and go home.

Or... maybe some of us are more like Mary Magdalene. We linger near the empty tomb. Our commitment, our love for Christ is stronger than our skepticism, our wonderings, our doubts, our resignation to realism.

We have worshiped week after week, we have lived this pattern of church loyalty and this Christian life for a long time. We have trusted God's grace, and we have believed God's power. And we know we are somehow bound up to Jesus the man and Christ the Lord.

Still, we pray and wonder why evil wins so often, like Mary did that morning - ask why good seems so obvious and often so crushed. We know we have to live in the real world, but we wish the faith would work - really work - as more than an ideal to be wished for. We wish people would love each other the way Christ loved, the poor would be fed like Jesus fed them, and the outcasts would be treated with decency after his example, that killing would end and people would love enemies, that powers would never stoop to conspiracy like they did that not-so-holy week, that the way Jesus said the world could work would be the way it really works.

But after wishing all that... evil still kills the innocent, evil still wins over love - empty tombs not withstanding.

We are like Mary. We sit as close to goodness and love as we can get in this sanctuary, and we grieve that grace is not as powerful as we wish. We worship in a kind of compromise between knowing what Christ has commanded us to do in the radical love of following him, and being realistic about the way the world really works where we have to guard against evil or suffer defeat. We know that love just does not win that often.

Looking like Mary into an empty tomb and wishing it were different, let's be honest. After 2000 years, don't you wish the Christian way was winning more? Don't you wonder why we haven't made more progress to make the world look more like God would want it? We keep hoping in spite of the evidence to the contrary, but we know what might happen to us if we take his example too seriously.

We keep thinking that people in relationships should be more than self-centered. We keep asking why children are neglected by parents and by our society, why the mentally ill among us are most of the homeless, why so many companies sacrifice people for profits, why nations are more ready to wage war than seek peace. We sit like Mary and ask what has happened and why more has not happened. And we grieve the fact that our faith is not strong enough to make a real difference in the world around us. We try not to ask ourselves why we do not have enough faithfulness to make more difference in the world near us.

We are like Mary, as close as we have been and as much as we are committed, we still wonder if Christ as the power to make our lives genuinely new, to make the world really a realm of his love and mercy.

We are like Mary, we hear "the word of the Lord" this Sunday, and it just sounds like the usual words of the Lord most every Sunday that we hear every time we come here. We hear the word, ...but we are not really listening.

Am I being too negative here? Did you expect the upbeat pep-talk about victory over death and eternal hope? Do you want to sing Alleluias and go through the motions of Easter more than put yourself in the place of John and Peter and Mary on that Sunday morning?

I just being honest with the text, standing with them in front of an empty tomb. Can I put us all in front of the empty tomb and wake us from our skepticism and realism and faith and doubt and question and confession, our wanting to live the life of Christ and wanting to be real about what works and what doesn't?

If we are not willing to admit the ways we are like those people at the empty tomb on that first Sunday morning, then there is not much hope of us this Sunday morning.

But if we come close to the empty tomb with all of our modern questions and our realistic doubt and our idealistic wishes and all our religious habits; if we come to this sanctuary with all of our questions about what really happened to Jesus and our desires to be faithful to his way, and all of our love for him in spite of the fact that we know our distance from his example,

...then we are in the place where *we* can experience the miracle of resurrection on Resurrection Sunday.

...then we are in the place where we can meet the risen Lord here in this sanctuary.

...then we are in the place where we open ourselves to the mystery that is beyond our question and doubt, and we can have just enough faith to listen to see if God has something more to say to us about love and grace, about power and faith and hope; about new life and a new world.

...then we will really listen and really hear the word of the Lord, thanks to God.

Deep down in your heart, in the center of our spirits, you will hear the risen Lord call you by name, and from that moment faith will begin its victory over sin and death, over your fear and doubt.

The last thing on earth Mary was expecting to hear was her name and to see her Lord. But in that call to her, Christ moved her beyond questions about an empty tomb to faith in a risen Lord.

This morning becomes Resurrection Sunday for us, because we hear the risen Christ call each of us by name. And Christ calls us this morning to live his risen life of faith so that we will be new people and the world will become the new realm of his love.

This Resurrection Sunday we are really are like those first followers that first morning. They heard Christ call their names, and they saw the risen Lord. They took the steps of faith past the question and doubt of an empty tomb, and they gave their lives, all of their lives - their focus and their energy and their effort and their all - to live his risen life in every part of their conscious being and doing.

They could have cared less about the arguments and explanations and proofs of how a tomb could have become empty. They did not need proofs. They knew the Lord was risen. They knew his power in their lives. They knew his love was at work among them. They knew that he was still feeding the hungry as they fed them, welcoming the stranger like he told them to do, and overcoming evil with the goodness of his grace. They knew that he was transforming lives from sin to love and reforming societies from evil to good through him.

They knew that sin and death are done, that love and life still conquers now and forever. They knew that the Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed!

How did they know? They listened for his voice every day. They heard him call them by name every day. They saw his risen power in their lives every day. They followed his way in all their ways every day, and they saw what he did through them every day. Every day after the first Resurrection Sunday was different from every day before. They knew that the Lord was risen. They saw their risen Lord in their deeds.

This Resurrection Sunday, we are like John and Peter, or like Mary. We have a choice. We can believe in an empty tomb and go home to live another week like last week. Or we can hear our name being called, and turn our lives around to greet the risen Lord and worship his risen presence among us. We can say yes to his call, and give our lives to live his life among us.

And when we keep listening and keep following, Second Presbyterian will be raised to walk in the newness of Christ's life. People near and far will see the power of Christ's love among us and the joy of faithfulness by our witness. And they will see more... when they look at us and how we live wholeheartedly - with our whole hearts - in Christ way, they will see that the Lord is risen indeed! The Lord is risen in our deeds!

The picture of the empty tomb from our stained glass window, and the word of the Lord on the front of our Order of Worship will become the testimony of our life together in Christ... "Through Christ we have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that our faith and hope are set in God."

The Lord is risen in our deeds! Alleluia! Amen.