

The Empty Cave: An Easter Story

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, April 12, 2020

They did not see what they expected when they rolled back the stone from Jesus's tomb. That morning, as the sun was rising, they expected death. Mourning. Grieving. And yet. What they found was a proclamation of life: they found nothing. No body, nothing to mourn. Simply a cave, a tomb. And this empty cave, this empty tomb, a sign of resurrection, of love, of hope. Even in the darkest of hours, miracles of resurrection can begin. This is the story of Easter.

The Passion narrative culminating in Easter details the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This story depicts a leader and his followers through dark, scary, anxious times, with a knowledge of hardships on the horizon. This begins with Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, followed by his prediction that he would soon be killed. The story depicts his last Passover dinner, later called the Lord's Supper. During this supper he divided between all of his disciples bread and wine, and asked them to remember him when they ate and drank: bread for his body and wine his blood. Jesus is later arrested, tried, and beaten. He was betrayed by one of his own disciples. After this betrayal Jesus is sentenced to death and mocked relentlessly by soldiers and citizens alike. The next piece of this story is familiar to many of us: Jesus is tortured, crucified, and, on this cross, Jesus dies. His body is later wrapped in cloth and placed in a tomb. But, as the story is narrated in Gospel of Luke,

"But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling

clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘why do you look for the living amongst the dead? He is not here but has risen.’” (Luke 24:1-5)

“He is not here, but has risen.” They went to the cave expecting death; prepared to mourn. They went to the cave, the tomb, grieving and prepared to care for a dead man. What they found, instead, was an empty cave. Jesus had risen! Jesus was resurrected. Jesus overcame death. These women were sent to spread the good news of the gospel.

Even in the darkest of hours, miracles of resurrection can begin.

For what was resurrected that day? As the story has it – a man. A remarkable man. And I ask us to reflect on that that man embodies; what was resurrected with Jesus?

Jesus embodied love. This is demonstrated throughout the Bible. It was his love that was so radical; his love that saved and healed. In my understanding, there were miracles, not of magic, but of love. He did not heal the sick and those cast aside to the margins of society with magic, but with an unexpected acceptance and deeply felt compassion. It was his reaction to those on the fringes of society that made him remarkable. It was love that made his touch healing, and it was love and acceptance and kindness that made this man unique in such a sacred way. That day, that Easter day, love was resurrected. Jesus proclaimed, “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Jesus taught his followers to care for everyone, especially the least of these. On this day, love prevailed. In the retelling of this story, we emphasize this. We emphasize love – both when it is easy and when it is hard. Love when we feel we are enclosed in the darkness, when we feel

all we can expect is that body in the cave. Love when we are scared, or when we would rather hide. Love when we would rather hate.

In the Gospel of John it is written, “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb” Rev. Jan Richardson responds,

While it was still dark.

While it was still night.

While she could not see.

While she thought death held sway.

While she grieved.

While she wept.

While it was still dark, resurrection began.

In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene arrived at Jesus’s tomb in such early hours the sun had not yet risen. In this gospel, she arrived in the dark, grieving. In the dark, expecting death. And yet. While it was still dark, resurrection began. In those morning hours while the sun was slowly rising, Jesus was resurrected and rose from the dead. In those dark, desolate, gloomy hours, love prevailed, and Jesus was risen. In the dark, there was hope. In the dark, a proclamation of life – for while death was known and death was expected, life and love were present in that cave that morning. We find ourselves this very moment in the dark. We find ourselves this moment, these hours, these days, these weeks, these months – in the dark. In the midst of a pandemic, overwhelmed hospitals, fear of illness spreading, this illness seemingly coming closer to us. In the dark, worried about the health of those we love and care about,

worried about our own health, scared. Anxious. Uncertain. In the dark. Yet in the dark, the resurrection begins.

We expect fear. We expect uncertainty. We expect anxiety. And this is fine and this is normal. At the tomb, they expected death.

We expect. But what do we find? A proclamation of life! When we look into our own cave with a myriad of expectations, we find love, friendship, faith, laughter – life prevails! I have seen this in this church – young adults joining together to play interactive games online – laughing! Folks sending each other pictures of nature and sharing recipes. Folks calling each other, sharing tips on making those crucial masks, joining together over Zoom, like we are this morning! A proclamation of life. Joining together in these new, sacred ways, driven by love. Driven by hope.

Love, and all that it entails, overcomes all obstacles. Jesus's love healed illness, cured those on the margins, gave those he encountered necessary hope. Let us emulate this love – let this healing love guide us in these dark days, in all days. Let us resurrect love.

And with love comes hope, and hope is crucial! For when they entered that tomb that morning, they did so without any hope in mind. For hope would not make sense. How could hope possibly overcome death? But! But. Death was overcome. Let this resurrection, this life after death – let this be a guiding light, a beacon of hope for each of us. Let us each hold on, tightly, to hope.

And when they found Jesus has been resurrected the sun rose – holy light. As the women left the cave to spread the good news, the sun rose and that light shown over that empty tomb.

That same holy light that starts each of our days. Let this inspire us – the sacred light of sunrise after a miracle. Let this inspire us – love. Let this inspire us – hope. “While it was still dark, resurrection began.”

As winter transitions into spring and spring into summer so does the landscape become filled with new life. The darkness of winter, those short days and long nights, night and day met at the equinox and then the darkness began to fade away.

And in this time of year we delight in the colors! I often walk on nature paths with my husband, and at this time of year we squeal in excitement over color! Tiny purple and white flowers scattered throughout the dirt and dry leaves. Green leaves budding at the ends of hard, brown branches. And in springtime we delight in this because by the time spring has arrived we are used to the dark and desolate winter. These colors, this new life – the emergence of these flowers draw such a stark contrast to the darkness of winter.

This is Easter – this renewal of nature. Of life! What more can be a proclamation of life than flowers, leaves, and moss delicately changing brown earth into pink, green, purple, and blue. These colors- a proclamation of life! These colors, hope. These colors, emerging from the darkness of winter just as we celebrate the resurrection of this man who embodied love. After winter, green looks like a miracle, a beautiful miracle. And this resurrection of nature, this transition from darkness to light, this reemergence of life after season of prickly, brown death, this resurrection happens each and every year. This resurrection of nature is proof that life will continue on, that life will be resurrected over and over again. Purple petals will ultimately flourish over the crusty brown leaves. And this celebration of life, of love- Easter! Will occur

year after year, serving as a yearly reminder of the power of love and miracles that come from dark places. Nature, life – all of this is cyclical; all of this will return, again and again. As we heard in our reading earlier, “You who have an eye for miracles regard the bud now appearing on the bare branch of the fragile young tree.”ⁱ

They did not see what they expected when they rolled back the stone from Jesus’s tomb. Instead of death, they were presented with an emptiness; an emptiness that meant life. And while today we celebrate this story of the resurrection of a man we also celebrate the resurrection of what he embodied: love. And we celebrate the hope that washed over those women when they expected death and found life. For while it was still dark, the resurrection began. The resurrection began, the sun crept over the horizon and we are still led millenia later by this sacred light! Let us be drawn by that holy light towards goodness and life. For just as those blooming petals remind us, just as this holiday begs us to remember, life continues on. Love overcomes all obstacles. Hope is present even when all else is lost. Let us celebrate the love embodied by this man; relentless, unexpected, remarkable love.

May it be so, and Amen

ⁱ Diego Valeri *An Eye for Miracles*