

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

It is Empty

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Luke 24:1-12

An empty tomb. The women left that morning with a task. They expected to find death here but instead found an empty tomb. In some telling's of this morning it takes Mary three encounters with this empty tomb before she understands what has happened. The first time she encounters the emptiness with her eyes. She sees the cloths left behind and the once tightly wrapped body gone. She thinks someone must have stolen the body. It's the only logical explanation for what her eyes are seeing. Someone must have wanted Jesus to be gone so badly they would stoop to robbing a tomb of its occupant. The second time Mary encounters the emptiness with her ears. Two angels meet her at the tomb entrance and tell her Jesus is risen. Her face must have given away her confusion because they try to remind her of lessons Jesus taught about this day. While she remembers the words Jesus said she can not fully hear the conclusions the angels are guiding her towards. The third time Mary encounters the emptiness with her heart. She is crying in the nearby garden and a man comes to comfort her. He asks why she is crying and she bears the grief of her soul to the stranger. When she is finished describing the emptiness she has seen and heard the man says her name, Mary.

Her ears know that voice. She looks up and her eyes, know that face. She relaxes, her heart knows it is Jesus. She suddenly realizes empty didn't mean something bad had happened. In fact it was the sign of something great God had done. Mary had a hard time understanding what was happening because emptiness had always been a bad thing. In her experience, empty jars meant no food to eat. Empty wells meant no water to drink. Empty pockets meant no money to purchase what was needed. Emptiness was not something to rejoice over. So when she saw and empty tomb she assumed the worst. What made the most immediate sense were thieves motivated by politics or religion stealing Jesus' body for their own gain. When she met angels telling her the truth she still could not fathom how this empty tomb was good news. Except that is exactly what it is, this emptiness is God's great news for the whole world. When Jesus arose that morning, he infused emptiness with possibility. Sins no longer left God's people empty, forgiveness rushed into the void. The world was no longer empty of an active God instead God was brought near to remain with us. Death no longer had the final say over an empty body, souls were freed to join God in eternal life. Emptiness no longer meant the end, it held the possibility for a new beginning.

While thinking about emptiness this week I tried to think of where in our world emptiness was a good thing. Hoping to find how that first Easter morning had inspired us to rethink emptiness, but I had a hard time thinking of something. The only empty thing that brought me immediate joy was to think of an empty laundry hamper, because it means I don't need to do laundry for awhile. But the reality Mary lived in is still very much our reality. Empty things are not awarded. Empty things are not generally great news. We have all experienced an increase of emptiness these past few weeks. Empty shelves at grocery stores. Empty classrooms. Empty manufacturing plants. Empty churches. Emptiness has caused us a lot of distress but there is a hope even for these times in what happened that morning Mary went to the tomb and found it empty.

That Easter morning redefined what empty can mean. I have heard people encouraging others to redefine how they talk about sheltering in place. Instead of thinking we are stuck at home, we can see ourselves as safe at home. This redefining of the situation is what Easter morning did to emptiness. It takes an empty tomb and says, "If Jesus is not here, it does not have to mean his body is stolen, it can mean he is risen and out in the world." Before Easter the only logical explanation is devious theft, after Easter it means Jesus is resurrected.

We can apply this Easter redefinition to all the emptiness in our lives. Empty shelves don't always mean hoarding. They also mean neighbors taking care of neighbors and communities filling the shelves of food pantries.

Empty classrooms can mean teenagers aren't fighting their natural sleep patterns to get up at 6 am for school. Empty classrooms can mean children learning to live with attention issues aren't forced to be attentive for 7 hours a day. Empty factories mean businesses were willing to value the health of their workers above potential profits. And empty churches... WOW. Empty churches mean the members are living more fully into their call to bless the world.

The things we have seen you all doing is truly astonishing. You have not stepped a foot in the building of the church in three weeks but have been the church in so many creative ways. Usually my job is to find volunteers and support for mission projects but because the church is empty my job has been redefined to fielding calls and making connections for people who are LOOKING to help. It really has been mind boggling. Emptiness after Easter holds so much possibility.

My hope for the future of our currently empty church is that we take extra care when we refill the pews. We will need to think about what we go back to and choose some things to be left behind. In our opening I mentioned some of the things Jesus left behind in the empty tomb. Things like fear and shame, old ways and our old selves.

Emptiness is also a sign that it was time to move on from something. That first Easter morning changed God's people and the world forever. It was scary, it was confusing, it was frustrating. But they worked through the redefinition one step at a time. Learning what to take with them, what needed to be left behind and what possibilities had opened up. When it is safe to refill our pews on Sunday mornings our church will need to do the same thing. It will be scary, it will be confusing, it will be frustrating. There may be things we have done that we realize can be left behind. But it will also reaffirm the practices we keep as we relearn why traditions like worshiping together are so powerful. We will be reenergized by the innovations you have all made these past few weeks and continue some of them into our future together.

The church hopefully will not be the only thing currently empty place that gets redefined. There is a lot of work to be done when possibility is unleashed on the world. It may be hard to grasp now because we are still somewhere between good Friday and Easter morning when it comes to the coronavirus. But even that Easter morning is coming. When that happens we will set out with a task to "get back to normal life" and find emptiness in many places of our former lives. In those moments I want you to hear the angels asking "why are you looking for the living among the dead" "why are you focused on getting back to the past when the future has been thrown open." We can choose to see emptiness or we can see possibility. We can sit in an empty tomb or we can leave behind the old ways and resurrect our selves and our world into something new.

Emptiness after Easter does not mean something terrible has happened, it means possibilities are alive. Jesus is risen, and so are we.

We have come to the tomb this morning to celebrate the resurrection of our savior Jesus Christ. This year we may feel more than ever what it is like to be entombed as we stay safe at home. But the day is coming where we will leave this place (Enter Sanctuary) and join together in this place again. When that day comes we will begin the work of affirming the traditions we love, leaving behind the things that no longer serve our community. And resurrect this place into something new for God's glory.

I look forward to that day.

May the God of possibility, who raised from the dead our Lord Jesus, provide us with every good thing we need in order to do God's will; and the blessing of almighty God, creator, Savior and Holy Spirit, be with us now and forever. Amen.