

“Empty” is a good word

John 20: 1-8 and Acts 10:34-43 – March 23, 2008 – Rev. Jim Cullen

This morning we might start by thinking about the word “empty”. This word often carries a negative connotation. The gas tank is “empty”. But this morning we can look to the positive. An empty ring box can mean that the ring is on the bride’s finger. An empty shoe box can mean the shoes are on someone’s feet. An empty plate can mean the food was good to the last bite.

The Easter story unfolds around an empty tomb. I believe that those who experienced the resurrection of Jesus could only take in so much. The empty tomb was a way to explain that Jesus was again amongst the living. Again this morning we heard the story about Mary Magdalene, then Peter, then John running toward and then into the tomb. All they found were the cloths of death. The empty tomb pushed them into a whole new experience – the first step in understanding that Jesus was alive in them.

We gather on Easter Sunday morning to consider the implications of the empty tomb. We come not to debate exactly what happened between Friday and Sunday. We come to hear that Jesus, who was dead, is alive. I would like to share some thoughts from Bishop Jack Spong, who with Marcus Bourg, offer us a fresh understanding of our faith.

Bishop Spong writes... “The experience of Jesus as risen Lord ... underlies every verse of Christian writing. There is no question about the reality of Easter as a source of power or the centrality of Easter in the life of the believer. Obviously something happened after the death of Jesus that had a startling and enormous power. Its power was sufficient to reconstitute a scattered and demoralized band of disciples. Its reality was profound enough to turn a denying Peter into a witnessing and martyred Peter, and to turn disciples who fled for their lives into heroes willing to die for their Lord. Easter was so intense that it created a new holy day, Sunday, the first day of the week and it created a new act of worship – the breaking of bread – Holy Communion. Easter was of such power, that Jewish disciples could not longer conceive of God apart from Jesus of Nazareth. They could no longer look at Jesus without seeing God. Easter meant that Jesus had been taken into God and vindicated by God. It also meant that Jesus had transcended death and was therefore even present to the disciples as the “Spirit.” (End of Dr. Spong’s words.)

I offer the following observations – some pictures – when put together may help us to be better Easter people.

I like to think about the faithfulness of the women who followed Jesus. According to Luke the women at the tomb were the same women who were with Jesus at the crucifixion and burial. They were included as the disciples of Jesus. They are mentioned by name. This is in contrast to the men who deserted Jesus when his life and theirs were in danger. The men responded with their minds and feet, the women with their hearts.

I like Luke’s account of the resurrection because it mentions us who are gathered here this morning. The women left the tomb with the assurance that Jesus was alive. ***They remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told the eleven and all the rest.*** “To all the rest” – that includes us.

I like to think about the story in John’s gospel where Mary, quietly weeping does not recognize Jesus until he speaks her name. It may be in our time of loss and when we are all alone that we too experience the risen Christ, who knows us by name.

I like to think about the “east” in Easter. A new day, a new opportunity for life – a new day to be alive.

I like to think about Easter as the eighth day of creation. Easter is so much more than Easter bunnies, baby chicks, and new growth in the garden. Easter is not a spring festival. Yet, there is a connection between these symbols of new life and the new life that God offers us in the Easter story.

We can add a new commandment to our faith “Consider the lilies:” Jesus said. Look for and find the beauty of living in God’s world.

I like to think about the Easter faith that calls people to worship on Sunday, people who experience a lot of stress in life, and walk through them knowing God is with them. I like to think about people who accept challenges and live with hope, people who know that with God all things are possible.

I like to think about people who know life is a continuum within and without the physical body. Death is a transition. Death takes us to another level of living. We can know this, not because we can prove it, but because Jesus did it.

I like to think about God who walks with us, who holds us in the palm of his hand, who gives new life to our lives, and puts a sense of peace and joy into our hearts.

“The message of the Resurrection isn’t simply don’t be afraid to die. The message of the Resurrection is don’t be afraid to live – to live for those things worth dying for.” (DeWane Zimmerman)

I like to think about Easter as our time to celebrate that this is God’s world and we are God’s people. Because of Easter our broken hallelujahs become holy hallelujahs. “Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed”. That is all we need to hear.