

sermon-4/4/10 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“When Emptiness Reveals Presence”  
Luke 24:1-12

Jana Childers, who teaches preaching at SFTS, says, “Many preachers find Easter the hardest day of the year. What metaphor, simile, analogy, poetry, or narrative lives up to the size of the resurrection?” She says we are always in danger of giving an illustration that is “beneath the dignity of the thing it illustrates.”

I can only say Amen to that. Easter sermons are tough. What can be said this year that many of you have not already heard countless times before? How can we enter into this most important Christian celebration in a way that will affect how we live tomorrow and the rest of the year? The only way to answer those questions is to just plunge in.

I’d like to start with a little aside concerning the women in this story. As one commentator has said, men in those days often reduced “the role of women in Jesus’ ministry and the early church to little more than hostesses and cooks.” Sadly that set the tone for how women have often been treated in the Church for two thousand years.

It was not so for Luke. Luke is the Gospel that treats women with dignity. Luke treats women as equals with the other disciples. No where is that more plain than in his telling of that first Easter. Scholars point out that in Matthew and Mark the women at the empty tomb are told to go and tell the disciples that Jesus has risen and will meet them in Galilee.

But in Luke, the women are not told to be little messengers to the real disciples. No, they are told to remember what Jesus had said while he was among them. Luke had already made it clear that many of these women at the tomb had followed Jesus his whole ministry. They had heard him speak many times. These women then decide on their own to be the ones to spread the good news of the resurrection to the other disciples. They were not a conduit between the angels and the real disciples. They were the first proclaimers of the good news. If only the Church had followed Luke more carefully, women would not have been so excluded from positions of leadership down through the years.

Let’s continue to follow the women in this Easter story to see what we can learn from them. One commentator said there are some important lessons this story gives us to ponder. The first is this: “God’s ways are not our ways.” Any human/divine encounter is filled with mystery and awe. We are out of our league when we enter that territory.

Therefore, we could use a whole lot more humility when we try to approach God. This commentator puts it this way, we are “used to thinking of Jesus as our good buddy” and have “tried to make God as knowable and dependable as breakfast cereal.”

Isn’t that the truth? We are uncomfortable with mystery and paradox. We want everything neatly explained, everything brought down to our size. But Easter just can’t

be made to fit our little world views. Even the Gospel writers have the good sense not to try and explain the actual resurrection. They leave that a complete mystery.

Note the women, when they enter the tomb, encounter what Luke later in chapter 24 (24:23) calls a vision of angels. They sensed this was not normal reality they were experiencing. They are terrified, struck speechless with awe in the presence of the holy. Their response was to bow their heads in worship.

The paradox here is that God's presence, formerly felt in Jesus' presence as he walked and talked with them was now experienced by them most profoundly in Jesus' absence! The tomb was empty. Another commentator said the whole life of Jesus led up to this: "a message that presence can occur in the midst of absence."

That's a hard concept to get our heads around on an Easter morning when we are busy thinking about Easter dinner, chocolate bunnies and Easter eggs. It certainly is a bit hard to explain. It is something, however, many have experienced.

Scholars tell us the Jews understood this paradox of presence in absence very well. When they built their Temple with its inner sanctum, called the Holy of Holies, they put a mercy seat in it where God was supposed to sit. "The Mercy Seat. . . was a vacant space between the cherubim." The Jews did not want to represent God's presence by any symbol or idol, so they created an empty space where they could come to God in prayer and devotion.

Elijah experienced his own paradox. He "heard" God's voice, so to speak, on the mountain top in a sound of sheer silence. That connects to some of our experience with God's voice. Many of us have never heard a voice when we pray to God, but in the silence of prayer we have felt heard and spoken to on profound levels. I think that is why many of us love the Taize prayer services filled with candle light and silences. It is when we learn not to fill the empty spaces in our lives and hearts that God has room to be present.

The Bible tells us we would not want to experience God's presence fully or completely. It would destroy us. Consequently there always seems to be something between us and God preventing us from a full encounter with the Holy One. Yet, paradoxically, what gets in the way of our experiencing God fully can be the very thing that helps us connect with God.

Simone Weil put it this way. She talked about how "two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God," she writes. "Every separation is a link."

Because of Easter and the empty tomb, every emptiness in our lives has the potential of revealing God's presence. When grief strikes so profoundly we can barely move, when death intrudes dashing our hopes, making us weep, God is in the center of that absence.

This is not some simple platitude that every storm cloud has a silver lining. Sometimes that is true, but not always. This is more a profound mystery that brings us to our knees, one that simply can't be communicated easily with words.

Note, when the women tell the other disciples about Jesus being risen, about presence in the emptiness of the tomb, they think it is an idle tale. Peter runs to check it out. Luke doesn't say he believes in the resurrection when he encounters emptiness. Luke simply says he was amazed. What does this mean? Is it true that life in God is something not even death can defeat? What will that say about how I live my life? How will it change my deep fears that prevent me from being a faithful disciple?

Those are questions that confront us each Easter. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen. What are we going to do with that? Amen