

## **The Empty Tomb**

Easter - 2024

The Easter story begins,  
not with eyewitnesses beholding Jesus  
as he comes forth with new life with the rising sun.  
It all begins with an empty tomb.

Easter does not say, "Here he is!"  
But, rather, "He is not here!"  
Easter and its empty tomb tell of Christ who is alive –  
and always with us-  
but also right ahead of us, to show us the way into the new life  
that God is always opening for us.

And so, let's go into the garden with Mary Magdalene  
to witness how the empty tomb changed her life.  
John's gospel is the only one to have Mary Magdalene  
going to the tomb by herself, without other women.  
This teller of good news is more like an artist than a photographer.  
He renders for us a purposeful interpretation  
rather than handing us an exact photo.

John wants to focus on Magdalene to give her prominence.  
While the other gospels name other women,  
Magdalene is the only one that all four gospels report at the empty tomb.

We find her coming there before dawn.  
She is the one, every family has one, the primary caregiver,  
bound to Jesus in devotion and obligation.  
The rest of Jesus' followers all know that she is the one appointed.

She represents the one sibling in a family who is bound to care for elderly parents.

She represents the parent who is devoted to the care of a child with special needs,  
well after the other parents' children have grown up and become independent.

She represents the healthy spouse who cares for their beloved  
through years of chronic and terminal illness.  
Not out of duty. But fueled by loving devotion.

She comes alone after all is said and done, and the burial has taken place,  
because she is driven, conditioned, to continue her faithful attention to him.

She needs to come here, where his body is laid, for where else should she be?

Had she gotten to the tomb and found it intact, without the stone rolled away, she would have probably sat there awhile, shed quiet tears, and asked God “why?”. She then would have gone home only to come back time and time again, because the tomb was as close as she could get.

But the stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty.  
Of course she is shocked, devastated.  
She immediately thinks that his body has been stolen.

Mary runs to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple,  
who come and see that she is indeed telling the truth.  
Peter also assumes the body has been stolen.  
But, the beloved disciple seems to begin to be putting things together in his mind.  
It begins to dawn on him as he recalls things Jesus has said,  
that this is not the end. There is more.

Both disciples leave, go back home.  
Mary remains there, unable to leave.

She must find his body. She must take care of it;  
to honor his memory, to hold on, cling to all that mattered,  
which, for all she knew, would remain in the past.

Mary sees a man and asks him to help her find Jesus’ body.  
If he knows where the body is, why,  
she will go get it herself and bury it in a safe place.  
It doesn’t occur to her that she will not be able do whatever it will take.

And then - it is when Jesus says her name  
that she knows that this supposed gardener is her dearly beloved teacher.

Mary recognizes Jesus not because he looks familiar.  
She recognizes him when he says her name.  
When someone who cares about you says your name with love, it says everything.  
Hearing her rabbouni’s voice say her name again  
must have been like oxygen flooding into empty lungs.

Surely in the moment that she recognizes him,  
she thinks, “Praise be to God. This has all been a nightmare!  
We have him back. I have him back. We can pick up where we left off.  
Of course she would have embraced him and held onto him!

And then, he peels her off and tells her to go!  
This is not about holding onto the past, Mary!  
Our time together has not been the whole story.  
It has just been a prelude! Don't even look back!  
You have something new, something more important to do!  
Go. Tell the others that I will go ahead of them and they, too, will recognize me.

And so, Mary Magdalene goes, and is the first one to declare the good news  
"I have seen the Lord!"  
In some early writings she is called the Apostle to the Apostles.

What does the empty tomb have to say to us?

The empty tomb says Christ is a step ahead of us,  
beckoning us into our future that is filled with new life and new hope.  
Beckoning you, the Church of the Holy Spirit, into your future  
that is filled with new life and new hope.

Why do we start with a tomb on Easter morning?  
We start with the empty tomb to remember that he is not there.  
And that being a Christian is not about going back  
but about moving forward in faith.

He says, "I am with you always."  
Don't look back – I'm not there. The tomb is empty.  
I am WITH YOU always."

If the artwork on the front of your bulletins was put to words,  
It would be in the form of this poem by Dylan Thomas,

which conveys the startling realization during a prayer  
that in Christ what appears to be the end is not the end  
but a bright and glorious new beginning.

*I turn the corner of prayer and burn  
In a blessing of the sudden  
Sun. In the name of the damned  
I would turn back and run  
To the hidden land  
But the loud sun  
Christens down  
The sky.  
I  
Am found.*

*O let him  
Scald me and drown  
Me in his world's wound.  
His lightning answers my  
Cry. My voice burns in his hand.  
Now I am lost in the blinding  
One. The sun roars at the prayer's end.*

As this loud 'Son' christens down the sky,  
As the triumphant victory over death makes its presence known,  
*I am found*, Dylan Thomas writes.

Isn't that what Mary Magdalene would say? I am found.

And I imagine even the day itself, if it had a voice,  
Would have said, I am not just another first day of the week.  
I am a brand new day... an 8<sup>th</sup> day added to creation!  
This is a new dawn.  
A brand new dawn made glorious in his being raised from the dead.

And if we chime in with those who saw the risen Christ  
we might say that if we, too, have been raised to the life in Christ  
we will find it true in our lives, that the end is not the end.

Thanks be to God for the empty tomb  
that sends us out into the new creation.