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THERE IS MORE THAN WHAT YOU SEE – Part III: THE EMPTY TOMB

A fascinating image of Easter is the one in each of the Gospels that depicts the disciples standing at the empty tomb, mouths opened, full of questions and fear. It must have seemed to them like that was the end of it. Jesus was dead; the tomb was empty; some grave robbers probably stole his body; end of story. Or is it?

None of the four Gospels recount the actual event of the resurrection of Jesus; they only recount the discovery of an empty tomb. St. Matthew's account that we hear this year includes some practical details: an earthquake (similar to the moment of Jesus' death in his Gospel alone), an angel with a message (similar to the angel who announced Jesus' birth to St. Joseph in his Gospel) and armed guards assigned by the Jewish and Roman authorities to prevent the disciples from coming to steal Jesus' body and then claiming he had risen.

In Matthew's account Mary Magdalene and the other Mary do not find Jesus, dead or alive. Rather they find an empty tomb, soldiers who are scared to death and an angel who interprets this experience for them. The angel's interpretation and explanation seems to have helped them

understand the meaning of the empty tomb so they could move beyond it and not get stuck there and, worse yet, give up hope. Perhaps the angel's advice can help us understand our faith experience better too.

First the angel has to tell them not to be afraid. Over and over again throughout the Scriptures the first reaction of people who in one way or another come in touch with the reality of God, God's presence or God's call is fear. The experience of God is always too much to comprehend and certainly too much to control. And in response these people of the Scriptures are always told, "Be not afraid". I am convinced that one of the reasons that the hymn by that title is so popular and why it so often moves people to tears is that we have the same primitive response of the people of the Scriptures and in particular of these two women tonight. Fear is way too

common an occurrence in our lives and it remains today, what it was in the days of Jesus, the greatest obstacle to real faith. I cannot understand God and God's way and I cannot comprehend or control the experience of God in my life and so I am afraid. It is hard to really trust God especially when things feel out of control. Have you ever been in the place of these two women?

Secondly the angel tells them that Jesus is alive and he points out the place where he had been entombed. It's empty. Tombs and other places and forces of death are no place to look for Jesus. Jesus is not there. Jesus will never be found in places or forces of death because Jesus is not dead.

So where do we look for Jesus after we go to the empty tomb? The angel tells the women that Jesus is going before them and that they will see him in Galilee. What is "Galilee"? In the post-resurrection Gospels Galilee is never just a geographical location. It was for those first disciples the place where they lived, the place where they first met Jesus, the place they left at his invitation, the place where it all began. It is a place of the heart. They are told to go back to the place where they live and Jesus will meet them there. And they go back and, sure enough, Jesus meets them there. He does not appear exactly as they remember him or as often as they would like him to, but he appears as more than a ghost and more than an idea. The Jesus who appears to them after the resurrection no longer fits their original expectation but he is tangible enough to be embraced, real enough to be taken seriously and powerful enough to change their lives.

There is a great truth of our Easter faith in that revelation. *Jesus always goes ahead of us to meet us where we live, in the midst of life rather than in some separate space.* If you really want to find the living Jesus, look where you live. I hear people say, as I am sure you have also, that they cannot find Jesus/God in church. Today's gospel tells us why that is so often the case. If you cannot find the living Jesus/God where you live, in your relationships, in your daily work, in the joys and concerns of your life, you will never be

able to find him in church. Recall the experience of the character Shug in the

powerful book and movie “The Color Purple” She tells her young friend Miss Celie that she has never found God in church. She explains, “I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folk did too. They come to church to *share* God, not find God.”

Once you discover a real living God/Jesus in the places where you live then you should have no problem finding God in church or in the scriptures or in the sacraments.

But like those early disciples that we read of in the Gospel the Jesus we meet will not be the same as we always knew him. Our childhood experiences of God last only as long as we are children. As we grow and mature, our faith must change and grow and mature as well or else it will not satisfy us. Many people try to survive on the faith of their childhood, the faith they learned about as a child at home or in religious education class and toward which they look back nostalgically. Faith is not nostalgia nor

can it survive on nostalgic memory. When they cannot experience faith in their own lives or in the Church they determine that faith must have been just a childhood thing. But faith is not a childhood thing; it's a lifetime thing. As in all other areas of human life what served us well as children will not serve us well as young adults; what served us well as young adults will not serve us well in middle age; and what served us well in middle age will not serve us well in the twilight of life.

And as with the early disciples Jesus will not appear as often as we would like. It is noticeable that Jesus did not appear to the disciples every day for the rest of their lives. There were those intense and sacred moments in which it was clear that Jesus was with them. We will hear about many of those early appearances of the risen Jesus over the next weeks in the Scriptures of the Easter season. But at other times the disciples had to go on memory and on faith. I believe that it is just like that with all of us. There are those moments when I know God is real and that he loves me deeply. Then there

are other moments when it feels like God no longer exists or at least that God is having little to do with me and my life. But the living pattern of the way faith in the risen Jesus works is such that we need to remember and cultivate those moments and circumstances that have brought God's real

presence. We each have these moments in our own lives: a moment of intense prayer or special need, a time of great blessing or a time a deep sadness, a birth, a death or just some surprising moment. We need to call them back to mind and heart especially when God seems distant or my need for God feels more acute.

The community of faith, the Church, has certain moments like that too when we say that the real presence of God is guaranteed. Such moments and events are the stories of the scriptures, the sacraments, the ministry we do in Jesus' name to continue his mission in the world and the example of faith that we share with one another here. These all can serve to evoke and nourish the experience of the God who lives in each of us.

And one especially guaranteed way of experiencing a risen Jesus is to do what we noticed Jesus doing on Thursday night and Friday: sacrificing and giving of himself to others. When God seems distant or even non-existent there is nothing like giving of yourself to someone else, pulling yourself out of the claustrophobic and self-centered place of your own wants and needs, to reawaken yourself to God's very real presence in your life and in this crazy world. It helps you recognize that in the end it's not all about you or your money or your kid or what team he/she makes or what school he/she gets into or your rank or your job or what others think of you. In the end what is most important is loving others as Jesus has loved us. There is nothing like it to reawaken and renew Easter faith.

Finally the experience of the risen Jesus is powerful enough to change your life. The testimony of believers down through the ages as the testimony of

our own parishioners who offered their faith reflections last Sunday in the Reflection Service here, is that faith is real, tangible and that it changes them. Ultimately faith is about transformation. Remember, Jesus was not

resuscitated; he was resurrected. That means that Jesus was transformed, changed. And as we will hear in the Scriptures of this Easter season the early disciples were transformed by their experience of Jesus from cowering and fearful people to people of great faith and courage. And so the great test of whether or not you really believe in Jesus is this: are you also transformed and changed by your relationship with Jesus and the community of Jesus disciples, the Church. That is where the rubber meets road: how your faith in Jesus changed you for the better?

The message and reality of the living God and God's faithful love cannot be stopped. The Gospels tell us that the people of power tried everything they could to stop him. They executed him, they placed a large stone over his tomb, and they even posted an armed guard to keep him in and to keep others out. But none of it worked. The tomb was empty; Jesus was raised up; the message was spread; Jesus is alive.

With the particular prayerful reflection and ritual we have been able to renew our experience of the living Jesus in these three days reflecting on the

meal of Thursday, the public execution of Friday and the empty tomb of tonight/today. And so we celebrate that great truth of our faith once again.

Happy Easter!