

April 16, 2022 – Easter Vigil

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

I remember, on Easter in 2020, I woke up very early in the morning. Like 3:30 or somewhere thereabouts.

COVID-induced lockdown was still fairly new and largely being observed, even in rural Montana. There wouldn't be any cemetery sunrise service, not in my congregation and not anywhere else around of that matter. But I knew one of my colleagues who lived right around the block would be awake soon, if not already. He had a habit of pre-dawn jogging. It was too cold for jogging in my book but I sent him a message to see if he would be up for meeting up at sunrise

to watch the sun come up over the Bear Paw Mountains from the cemetery at the end of the road. He said sure.

I put on my mask, knowing we'd stand more than 6 feet apart outside but better safe than sorry and it was cold enough that the mask was a nice nose and lip warmer anyway. We chatted a bit, we prayed for each other's congregations and we admired the beauty of the color in the sky.

Then we went home. And later that morning, we gathered as a family around our TV screen and I watched myself lead a service we had pre-recorded some days earlier, and I paused the video when I told myself to pick up the bread and paused again to serve wine and grape juice. And it was the weirdest Easter and I think the first time I didn't enter a church building on Easter Sunday since high school.

But something tapped on my shoulder and woke me up... I'll go ahead and blame the Holy Spirit. And told me to

go to the tombs. And go with another believer, the only one I knew would likely be awake and not baffled at the sentiment and the request. And honestly I don't remember attending an actual cemetery Easter sunrise service prior to that. I slept in through some in California before I ever had any inclination to go to seminary. And I went to a sunrise service in a lovely city park on a pleasant Easter morning in 2017 in Arizona. I felt cold but only because I'd had 8 months to get acclimated.

I'll have to do an Easter sunrise in the cemetery sometime when more than just two are gathered. The symbolism resonates with me. And though you wouldn't have found me lingering around any cemeteries before my baptism in college, with the promises spoken over me there in tow and a little bit more maturity, I would find myself drawn to them time and again wherever we would travel. One of the first times I recall just spending an hour or two walking among the headstones and soaking in the history, the

humanity and the holiness they represented came on a day trip 16 years ago, heading up from our home then in Bremerton to that little burg we all pass through on our way to the Kingston ferry. Port Gamble.

In the years since, our family has done much the same at many stops: Bodie, California; Tombstone, Arizona; Boston, Massachusetts; Normandy, France; Stavanger, Norway; Berlin, Germany; Marrakesh, Morocco; and many more.

Tombs, headstones, columbarium niches, garden plots... they all tell familiar stories. Sometimes literally what's at the root of "familiar": *family*. My paternal grandfather's name is etched into a niche at the Punchbowl veterans' cemetery in Honolulu but it's also etched into my own mind and memory after I first visited it and left a flower lei. My *maternal* grandfather is buried somewhere in the Seattle area and I don't know that anyone has been back to

visit since he was laid there in 1972. I have tickets for a hockey game a couple of weeks from now in Seattle and I decided a couple of weeks ago that I'm going to try and find it before I head downtown.

When we go to a graveyard, we go largely to remember. Even when we don't know the dead, we never met them, it's hard to help but imagine. When the Marys, Joanna and the other women who Luke does not name went to the tomb where Jesus was laid to rest, they knew him. If not by blood, then by love and the bonds they had forged together, they were family. Those men in dazzling white, appearing much as Jesus had on the mountain at the Transfiguration, their question is clever but as confusing as the emptiness of the tomb.

For they didn't go to look for the living. For all they knew, Jesus remained dead. Until rather recently, *cough* Lazarus *cough,* that's what the dead did. But at the

prompting of these eye-catching snappy dressers (Luke doesn't call them angels), they remember. At the tomb, they remember. And they remember everything Jesus told them about himself, how he had tried to prepare them for this moment and for the days that had led up to it.

It's easy to be baffled at how they ever could have forgotten. But hindsight is 20/20. How hard would that message have been to understand? And at the end of Luke's empty tomb account, does anyone yet understand still? It's as hard for the apostles to understand as it is for these women who tell them about what they saw ... and they had been told many a time, too, what was coming. They too had witnessed the miracle of Lazarus being brought back from the dead.

But they still heard it as nonsense. Foolishness. And they have no hesitation in telling the women who went to the tomb that. And even Peter who goes to the tomb to at least

have a look for himself, he's just amazed. I imagine also shocked. Confused.

We have heard this story so many times, but it still ought to strike us as nonsense. Foolishness. This sort of thing doesn't happen. Jesus' resurrection doesn't reflect any of our experiences.

And yet.

And yet, every time I go to Whidbey Island and I'm in Freeland, I try to make it down to the beach at the county park and walk across the sand and on to the pier and go down to the end of the dock where we scattered the ashes of my mom's mom, who I remember the best of all my grandparents because until she died when I was 13, she lived with me and she helped to raise me. We only scattered her ashes there 7 or 8 years ago, after finally agreeing on a final resting place for her after all the years and having these memory stones made my glass blowers in a shop at the old

Langley firehouse. And I also remember when her ashes were in the car, and Liana was just a tiny toddler, how she spoke to the box and caught her great-grandma Edna up on the last 20-ish years as best she could, from what she had been told ... at least getting the details of the last year or two at that point down pat.

And at the end of that dock, the wind is always blowing... I'll go ahead and blame the Holy Spirit. The waters of Holmes Harbor represent the tomb of the person in my family who loved me the most in my life. And I remember that when we see each other again someday, it's all because of God emptying that tomb long, long before.

And I'm still amazed at what happened.

Alleluia!

Thanks be to God.