

“Bring Our Emptiness to the Tomb”
Mark 16:1-8

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I have an Easter confession to make to you all this morning. It is about an Easter Sunday long, long ago when I became a hardened criminal.

I was eight years old on this particular Easter morning and as usual, I was the first person awake in my family. I ran out of my bedroom on the hunt for Easter baskets, hoping to get a sneak peek before anyone else. There on the kitchen table, were two gigantic baskets, one for me, and one for my older brother Brian. They were your standard Easter baskets: chocolate, candy, little toys. As I peered into them, my joy quickly turned to disappointment as I realized that the more exciting of the two baskets – the one bursting with new packs of baseball cards – was the one destined for my brother. My basket had some books, and a new troll doll, but nothing as exciting as baseball cards.

I remember thinking that the Easter bunny must have gotten confused – not everyone knows that little girls also like baseball cards – clearly it was an innocent mistake. I remember thinking that surely if the Easter bunny knew how much I also loved collecting baseball cards, he would have left some for me as well. After a minute pouting, I quickly switched to problem solving mode.

I was the only one awake. No one else in my family knew what was in the Easter baskets. It was a secret between me and the Easter bunny, and he wouldn't show his face for another year. Since it was obviously an unjust mix-up that needed to be righted, I stole half of the baseball card packs from my brother's basket, and tucked them inside of mine. Then, to make sure no one would suspect anything, I ran back to bed and pretended to sleep until everyone else was up and

waiting for me at the kitchen table. The moment I transformed from “kid criminal” to “hardened criminal” was the moment I pretended to be surprised and delighted – as if seeing my basket for the first time.

My mom didn't seem as delighted as I was about my baseball cards, but she didn't say anything. The whole day went by and I kept my head down, focused on egg hunts and visiting family. No one said a word. When my mom tucked me in at bedtime, she finally said this, “You know, Liz. I got a call from the Easter bunny this evening. He wanted to know how you and your brother liked your baskets, and he was surprised that there were baseball cards in your basket, because he left those especially for Brian. Do you know how they got into your basket?”

In the midst of wet, sloppy tears, I confessed everything. My mom didn't shout or punish me. She listened, and when I was done, she asked me to tell my brother the truth. Brian received an even tear-ier confession; one that I think embarrassed him more than anything. He responded with a surprising amount of grace, especially for a big brother. Because of their gentle reactions it the face of my crime that Easter was my first and last day as a criminal.

That is my Easter confession. I am not only a thief, but a failed thief. I am reminded of this story every Easter and it still embarrasses me a little. To me, it feels like everyone else is focused on joy and celebration today and I carry this memory with me – a memory where I learned a huge lesson not only in what not to do, but also one in the gentle forgiveness and compassion that my family offered. Each year in the midst of joyful alleluias, I carry with me a twinge of embarrassment and shame, and the warmth of grace and love from ones who forgave me before I forgave myself. In many ways it is a silly memory, born of the innocence and impishness of a child, but nevertheless, it has become woven into my understanding of what Easter is. That experience taught me that though there is a lot of joy in Easter, there are a whole

host of other emotions tied to this day – as much in our own lives and our individual Easter experiences as in the lives of the witnesses that first Easter morning.

On that first Easter, the women, the two Mary's and Solome, who arrived at the tomb were full of their own conflicting thoughts and emotions. I imagine the grief they would have brought with them at losing a loved one. The grief would be mixed with other emotions – shame over things they did and didn't do to stop Jesus' death, anger at the ones who killed him, and perhaps a bit of relief in believing in that moment that Jesus had been wrong after all, he was not the Messiah and therefore the cost of discipleship was suddenly much lower. Relief that the tension and the drama of the last few days was coming to an end.

When instead of Jesus' body they found the stone to the tomb rolled away and a young man sitting there, I imagine the tears turning to fear of thinking someone stole Jesus' body, tears mixed in with the guilt of having left that body unguarded for even an hour.

On that first Easter morning, the emotion was raw – those who were closest to Jesus were more prepared for the depths of despair, the ache of loss, and the agony of the soul than they were prepared for a resurrection celebration. They would have felt very out of place here in our sanctuary this morning. The joy of Easter day has been built up over the centuries, because we all know how this particular story ends, but initially there was no joy, only grief and pain.

This complexity of feelings makes the Easter resurrection story a lot more complex, and a lot more relatable. I am sure this morning there are those of us who came to this sanctuary with emotions tucked inside of us that we would rather cast aside in the name of a holiday celebration. Some of us carry grief of missing loved ones who are not here today; some carry the impending stress of gathering at crowded dinner tables with friends and family while others know the loneliness of a quiet meal planned. Many of us carry the guilt of feeling like in the midst of those

emotions we aren't more focused on being grateful for what we have or more focused on the spiritual side of the day. For some of us, this morning we carry the doubts and disbelief that keep us away from church on most Sundays. For others of us, we hold onto the doubts and disbelief that keep us coming here as many Sundays as possible.

There is joy here – there is always joy – but there is so much more that we have to wade through, to feel and sort out and acknowledge, before we can fully embrace the joy. Like the women brought to the empty tomb, we are bringing the weight of our yesterdays and last weeks and all that we have experienced as we enter into Easter.

The Good News of Easter is twofold: the Good News is of course, that Christ is resurrected and that nothing can overcome God's love in the world, not even death. The *other* Good News is that this news was and is true no matter what we are feeling or carrying with us this morning. No matter what we have done in the past, or what burdens we carry, it does not change the fact that Christ is resurrected! There is nothing that could keep Christ from being resurrected on that first Easter morning, just as there is nothing that can keep the resurrected Christ from us today.

We like to say that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Well this morning I would like to rephrase that and say: No matter who you are, or what you have done, or what you are feeling, or what you need to confess: Christ is resurrected! Christ is resurrected for you, for me, for every single one of us! Nothing can change that! Nothing can stop God's love from coming into the world. Nothing can prevent the story from being told or from being true – not that first Easter morning or any morning after. Hope is alive. No matter what we carry with us today, hope cannot be taken away. Christ is resurrected. When the three women were confronted with this truth, they were seized with terror and

amazement, so much so that they were silenced by their fear. This did not keep Christ away. Mark's gospel continues and says that Christ later appeared to Mary Magdalene and this second time she was able to better understand and move from terror to hope. Christ helped her see him – really recognize him in the midst of her despair – and helped her understand that nothing could keep God from coming back into the world, from bringing forth life and love, even in places that only knew emptiness and grief.

What the three women learned on that first Easter is the Good News of the resurrection of life does not depend on us being endlessly perfect or endlessly joyful – resurrection of life and love does not depend on us having the answers, or depend on us feeling or saying the right thing at all the right times. It doesn't depend on us at all. We are beside the point. The point of Easter, the Good News of Easter, is all about God. No matter what we are thinking or feeling, God is still here. Christ has returned! Nothing can keep him away! We carry our burdens and our pain, and still he returns. The promise of Easter morning is that nothing can keep us from Jesus – nothing can keep us from God – nothing can keep us from God's love. Not even death can separate us from love. No matter what has happened or what will happen, life and love still triumph. Alleluia!