

“Again & Again The Sun Rises”

Mark 16:1-8

Pastor Liz Miller

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This time last year, as I spliced together dozens of recordings of Edgewood members from the safety of their homes proclaiming, “Christ is risen!” I thought that would be the only time I celebrated Easter outside of the church sanctuary, the only time I would be hearing a virtual choir with a virtual orchestra accompanying our singers instead of having brass spilling out of the crowded choir loft, the sanctuary radiating with song that is all the more radiant for its missed notes and offbeat bellows. I never imagined this year we’d be yet again exploring new ways of worship, a time of seeking each other out in real-time while still keeping each other safe as virus numbers soar through our community.

But with the perspective of a year, these feel like the most faithful and theologically sound Easter celebrations we have ever had in our lifetime. Easter is not about knowing what to expect. It is not about being able to predict exactly what will happen or knowing the rituals and words by heart. Easter is not about having the answers - answers about Jesus, answers about God, answers about the meaning of life. The Easter story we heard today does not wrap up the story of Jesus nice and neat, packaged with a bow.

What does happen is we witness the life-altering moment when the three women arrive to anoint Jesus’ body and instead they realize that his body is gone. We watch as the women encounter the angel, listening to his words and fleeing in terror and amazement. But we don’t see questions answered. We see in the women’s surprise glimmers of what is going on, but this is not the day to process everything that has come before and everything that is yet to come. This is not

the day when Jesus sits the disciples down, holds their hands, and patiently explains everything they have ever wondered about, without parables or double meanings, with plain, direct language they can understand. That does not happen on this first Easter morning.

That first Easter morning is not about having all the answers. It is not about concluding the story. On Easter morning, the story is just beginning, and the answers the women and the other disciples seek have only begun unfolding.

Easter morning is about the possibility of what is still to come. It is about taking something that we thought was done and over and opening it back up to discover something still at work. I would say that on Easter morning there is no period at the end of a sentence, there is only a coma, waiting for what is next. On this Easter morning, the empty tomb, is not a sign of the end, it is a sign of the beginning. Let me explain:

When I see something that is empty, in it is an invitation to fill it. For example, an empty lot waits for an architect's dreams to transform it into the foundation of a new building. An empty field waits for a farmer to plant her seeds so that the field can be filled with fruits and vegetables and flowers. An empty baby book waits for a tiny child to be born, and for her parents to fill its pages with details of their baby's firsts: first laughs, first steps, first trip to the zoo. An empty mixing bowl waits for the baker to add ingredients, transforming them into dough before filling a previously empty oven with the fresh bread, filling a house with its warmth and yeasty smell.

It is said that when JRR Tolkien was a teacher, grading English exams, one of his students left a page blank in the middle of the exam booklet. It was on that empty page that he first wrote, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." It was encountering the empty page where he wasn't

expecting one that allowed him to open up his imagination and write a story that would turn into the beginning of one of the most popular literary series ever written.

Once you begin looking for empty places and empty things, you will discover that they are all around you. Emptiness can be powerful but too often, rather than looking at emptiness as a good thing, we fear what is empty. We fear that we will get lost in the emptiness. We fear that to go to a place of emptiness is to be empty ourselves, and we are often afraid of what that implies. The feeling of emptiness is such a profoundly human emotion. It is the feeling we get when someone we love leaves us, it is the gaping hole in our hearts when a dear friend dies. It is the hollowness in our stomach when what we once knew to be true is taken away from us.

Emptiness follows us when we are hurt, when we grieve, when we are in pain, and when we struggle. Anyone who has ever felt empty and come out on the other side of it knows that emptiness is not the end. It can transform into something new, something healing and live-giving. It may never be the same, and we may always remember that empty feeling, but we are able move through it. At its best, it becomes an invitation to enter a new place in our lives.

On Easter morning, we find God in the empty tomb. The emptiness first symbolizes the emptiness that Jesus' followers felt after his death, but God takes that place of sadness and pain and demonstrates to the women that emptiness can also be a thing of wonder. By encountering an empty tomb, their reality is turned on its head. They are offered a new kind of truth—one that would change their lives forever.

Easter is a celebration of emptiness. We say "Alleluia!" at the empty tomb, and in encountering it, year after year, we are reminded that as hard and scary as it can be, emptiness holds promise. We don't know what is yet to come, but in the not knowing we hold onto hope. On this Easter morning many of us came to worship with feelings of emptiness inside of us.

Many of us relate more to feelings of fear and doubt than certainty about what will be waiting us tomorrow, or the next day, or the coming years. Our Easter task is to join the women in approaching the empty tomb, to courageously face it for ourselves, with the hope that God will be there waiting for us saying “Do not be alarmed. Do not be afraid. Jesus has been raised. Death did not have the last word.” On Easter morning, when you step into the story of the empty tomb, the question is not “what just happened?” but the question is “Where will you go from here?”

When the women stepped into the empty tomb, it was only then that they could begin to imagine how they might move away from the horrible violence of the cross and into a place of new life and renewed purpose. It is only then that they could begin to feel that even after death, Jesus would be with them. It is counterintuitive but it is the truth of Easter morning: you have to be able to face the empty tomb to find new life.

Easter Sunday is not a holiday for people who have all the answers. It is a day for us to approach the empty tomb and to begin to imagine how it might be the beginning of a new story, a new chapter. The Good News of Christ's resurrection is that life is not over, death has not won. There is still much life to be created, there are still disciples to be made, stories to be told, and calls to answer. The Good News of this Easter morning is that God is in the emptiness. God is in the unexpected surprises, in the grief and the hope that we encounter. God is waiting for us in the empty tomb, ready to transform it into something new, ready to transform us for a new season of life. May it be so. Alleluia!