

At the Empty Tomb

The Easter story begins at an empty tomb; an event that those who came there were not expecting. Each presentation of the events of that morning are different in some way, this is not surprising since the story was an oral tradition for almost a generation of believers. We have two accounts of this story before us this morning, and like the other accounts, they begin in much the same way—at the empty tomb. This story in both accounts begins in darkness—that seems fitting as those who loved Jesus of Nazareth came to the site where they knew his body had been taken. Those who came, whether only Mary Magdalene or her and others, they came with a purpose—to anoint the body according to their rituals; to provide care and honor for the one they loved. But as they came near and the dawn began to shine, it becomes apparent that what they discover is totally unexpected—and like much of their journey through the Galilean countryside—they will not understand what is happening for awhile. According to Mark's gospel, three women approach the site of the tomb very early. As they approach the tomb they wonder who they will get to roll away the stone placed in front of the tomb. When they arrive, they see that stone rolling isn't going to be a problem as the stone has already been rolled back. In John's account of the morning, Mary Magdalene comes alone to the tomb and finds the great stone placed at the entrance has been rolled away. She becomes alarmed and doesn't even go inside—but runs to give Simon Peter and the other disciples this disturbing news—"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." For her, at this point there is no realization that what Jesus had told them about not only the manner of death, the suffering he must endure, but that he would rise again had all actually happened. On hearing her words, Simon Peter and the one John's gospel calls the beloved disciple both go running to the tomb in what sounds like a race. The unnamed beloved disciple looks inside, sees the discarded linen wrappings, but doesn't go inside. Peter of course, enters the tomb, sees those linen wrappings for the body, but also notices that the cloth for Jesus' head was folded and laying elsewhere. John then tells us that the beloved disciple who arrived first, then also entered. John then adds this cryptic statement that when he entered, he saw and believed. However, John does not elaborate on what this disciple believed, but tells us "for they as yet did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead." When Mark gives us this account, the women enter the tomb without involving the male disciples. But in Mark's account the tomb is not empty. Instead "they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed." Mary Magdalene was alarmed because the tomb was empty; these women were alarmed because it was not. The young man greets them with what throughout scripture is the standard greeting for a divine messenger: "Do not be afraid." Somehow this message rarely actually seems to work; human beings encountering the divine become afraid. This messenger continues—knowing that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, he tells them: "you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him." Both gospel accounts establish firmly that Jesus' body was not in that place. According to John, the disciples who came running, whether after seeing the tomb and lines they believed or not, their response was to return to their homes—they did not understand. Mary Magdalene, evidently coming back with the disciples has remained outside the tomb weeping, but when they leave, she enters the tomb, which is no longer empty. She sees two beings—angels in white—sitting

where Jesus' body had been laid. She is not alarmed, even though she encounters, not a young man dressed in white, but two beings recognizable as angels, messengers of God. They inquire of her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" She repeats her fear and grief that Jesus' body is not there and turns around. When she turns she sees someone else. Of course, as narrator, John identifies this someone as Jesus, but also tells us that she did not know that it was Jesus and assumes him to be a gardener. She wants to know where Jesus' body is, promising if he tells her that she will take him away. Jesus' appearance and voice are such that she does not immediately know him, even seeing him and speaking to him. Or perhaps it is not so much his appearance as it is that the possibility that the man she has followed, the man she saw crucified dead and wrapped in those linens and place in the tomb is beyond her comprehension. But Jesus knows her, and calls her by name which opens her eyes to who he is. In her joy, I imagine she reached out to touch him, which elicits the response from Jesus for her not to hold on to him. Jesus then gives her a message for the disciples: "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" She obeys and goes and announces to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord" and relays what Jesus has told her. Later, we will see how the disciples respond to her news, but that she went and told them of her encounter at the tomb is a much more satisfying result than the account we find in Mark's gospel. It seems in Mark's account that the story comes to an end at the tomb. After receiving the news from the young man that Jesus has been raised, he also gives them a message for the disciples: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter, that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." In this message, there is a promise of future encounters, but "they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." And according to the most ancient of documents the gospel of Mark actually ends there. There is not only no account of them saying anything, but there is no resurrection appearance. That seems to me to be the crucial difference in these accounts. Although from John's gospel the message given for the disciples speaks only of Jesus' coming ascension, no future encounters are promised—Jesus is seen and recognized as being alive. Mark tells us that Jesus promises to meet with the disciples back in Galilee, but he is not encountered. What a difference that seems to have made. Of course, since Mark begins telling his story he opens with the positive statement that what he is recording is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.", the way the text stops there is unsatisfying. Probably that is the reason some text have additional verses—in fact there are two groups of verses which in our text appear as the "longer" or "shorter" version. But the important message for us as disciples here and now—is: what is our response. At the site of the tomb, none of what was happening made any sense to them. Any way you look at it, either of these accounts is a mighty fragile beginning for a religion that has lasted about 2000 years now. And yet, when we tell this story, that is where so many of us continue to focus our energy: on that tomb, on that morning, on what did or did not happen there and how to explain it to anyone who does not happen to believe it too. Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen, which is why it helps to remember that no one saw it happen on Easter morning either. The resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus' life that was entirely between him and God. There were no witnesses whatsoever. No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb, because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. Some who arrived saw nothing, the two men disciples

saw discarded clothing, some saw a young man robed in white, one saw two angels. Most of the disciples saw nothing because they didn't even come to the tomb that morning. But that they didn't come didn't matter, because Jesus was no longer there. He had left the tomb because that was too small a focus for the resurrection. The point was that the tomb was empty and Jesus, the risen Christ was out and about in the world. On Easter morning we celebrate that Christ has left the tomb behind to be out in the world. It is the post-resurrections appearances that are more important; not what happened in the tomb. What happened in the tomb was entirely between Father and Son, Jesus and God. For the rest of us, what is important is that when Jesus called Mary by name, she knew who he was. That is where the miracle happened and goes on happening—it is not in the tomb that we encounter the living Lord—it is in the following of his teachings to love one another and to know that we are loved by God no matter our failings. Because the good news of this morning is not so much that the tomb is empty, but that we are not alone because Jesus is risen and goes with us out and about in this world here and now. Thanks be to God.