

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
7:00 p.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist  
The Great Vigil of Easter – April 15, 2017

---

“About that Empty Tomb...”

---

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10; Easter Vigil A

---

*“So the women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy...”*

Thank God someone had the good sense to flee quickly from that tomb with fear and joy like the loving, grieving, hopeful, frightened, shocked human beings that any of us might be when confronting a great earthquake, an angel descending from heaven with an appearance like lightning who tosses back a stone likely as heavy as a car, and shows us where our dead friend should be, but is not. “Do not be afraid,” says the angel. Fat chance. That fear the women feel... that’s real to me.

But you can go on the internet today and find a thousand Easter sermons that all try to tell you the same thing: “Everything is okay. He is risen! The empty tomb proves beyond any doubt that Jesus came back to life.” I’m less sure how real that is. Just because we incessantly proclaim the resurrection doesn’t make it so. And to me I suppose the empty tomb only proves that it was reportedly empty, that no dead man was inside it.

So, to tell you the truth, I came here this evening looking for something else.

And I'm not looking in any tomb or graveyard. And you might think I'm like one of those internet preachers who would probably tell you now that I came here because that tomb is empty and I'm looking for Jesus... but that's not what I was going to say. I was going to say that, first and foremost, I came here this evening looking for... you. I came to the place where I hoped I would be joined by others who want to understand this peculiar Holy Day. I wanted to be with others on Easter who are still willing to gather to *wonder* at just what happened on that day so long ago. I wanted to be with other people still willing to express the earnest hope of Jesus' earliest followers: that he is not dead, but living. I wanted to be with people who are at least curious, maybe struggling to be faithful, and with those who absolutely have found their way in life because of Jesus. I'm looking to be with people who understand Jesus more as *a way to live* than as a belief, an experience more than a story, a practice more than a doctrine, as love more than creed.

There's more. I came here this evening to honor my parents and my friends who taught me the Christian faith. I came here to support my wife and children, in whom rests so much of my life and hope. I came here to pray for a friend who is sick and dying this evening. I came looking for those who are here always, week by week, and I came looking for those who still come out just this one time of year, because they are still hoping for something. I came because I'm longing for peace. I came for those who have no peace and those who destroy peace. I came thinking of those

people who I believe made a tremendous mistake when they hurt Jesus. And I came because I appreciate those women at the tomb who I believe truly loved him. These are real reasons, living reasons, to be present together on this Easter Eve, not simply nostalgia or vapid proclamations intended to deny death and suffering still so present in our world each day.

William Sloane Coffin once said, “I myself passionately believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced him as a presence, not as a memory.” (Lang, John C., W.S. Coffin, Jr.: Preacher to America’s Conscience; gleaned from books.google.com). That’s as good a testimony to faith in Jesus as I have ever heard. It tells the truth of one’s life. It is heartfelt. It is personal. It seeks not to give extraneous proofs or make oppressive religious demands upon the intellect of the hearer. It’s not about a missing person, rather it’s about a present companion.

So I suppose a reason I didn’t come here on this Easter evening looking for Jesus is because... I don’t have to. Though I wonder about all that happened on that first Easter day so long ago, I also bear the experience of Jesus with me, with us, here, now and already. It is not his absence from a tomb that convinces, rather it’s his presence revealed in our lives. And it won’t solely be our liturgical proclamations of Easter and its empty tomb that make the difference for good in this world. Rather it

will be the proclamations shown by the way we live... by the way we treat one another, the way we care for those most rejected by society, the way we support one another in times of need, the way we heal the burdens of this earth, the way we choose to forgive, the way we pray for our enemies as Jesus taught us to do, the way we hold to the hope that, despite all the hardships and uncertainties of life, and the very real certainty of death, Jesus is also very real and present now, and that, in the end, life matters, things will be set to right, and that there is indeed goodness in the world.

*So, the little boy came home from church with his mom, and she asked him, "What did you learn in Sunday School today?" And the little boy said, "Nothing." "Well, didn't you study Jesus?" she asked. "Naw," said the little boy. "He didn't even show up."*

Well, eyes open, everybody! Take a look around, because I think he has shown up. It's not the empty tomb that convinces me that Jesus is risen. It's the populated church. Where two or three are gathered together in his name ---or 102 or 103--- he will be in the midst of them. Christ is risen indeed. Happy Easter!