



Easter Sunday April 12, 2020

First Lesson: Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24

Gospel Lesson: John 20: 1-18

Sermon Title: "Where is the Good News?: Emptiness"

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**We have come to the day of Resurrection otherwise known as Easter, and lo and behold, what I have preached on Palm Sunday about the double meaning of Hosanna has come into fruition...**

For what started out as a fanfare celebration, filled with glad Hosannas on Palm Sunday, has now turned into a time of mourning for some; for Jesus has been brutalized, scrutinized, and crucified...

And our gospel informs us that Mary Magdalene; a woman whose story is still somewhat of a mystery to us for she has been known to be the woman who was demon possessed; **or perhaps she was** the repentant prostitute or promiscuous woman; **or perhaps she was** the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus feet; historically scholars are still debating the accuracy of these conflated theories; but either way, Mary is the first eyewitness as she approached the tomb of Jesus; only to find the stone to be rolled away from the mouth of the tomb and lo and behold the structure that should be housing Jesus' body is empty; with the exception of the linens that were used to clothe his beaten body.

And as a side note, I would be remiss if I did not highlight that as a woman in leadership, I am glad that it is Mary who is first on the scene.

For although women in church leadership have come a mighty long way, there is still sometimes those voices of doubt that surfaces and whispers within my own ear and questions the efficacy and ability of my own call as a preacher/teacher of the gospel because I am a woman.

And so Mary's questionable and checkered past and her gender proves to be worthy in God's eyes, to be the first on the scene to witness the unimaginable....an empty tomb.....

And so it is through Mary's eyes, you and I are invited to weigh in on what all of this means; hence the title of this weeks sermon in our series "Where is the Good News?: Emptiness."

For there were a number of detectable emotional responses that surfaced within our gospel at the discovery of this emptiness....

Shock, confusion, lament and fear;

Where did the body of Jesus go?

How are we to anoint his body?

And the most urgent concern per Mary was 'who stole Jesus body?' However, interestingly enough, no one's first, second or third thought or response towards this emptiness was hope;

Furthermore, resurrection was a concept that I am almost certain was unfathomable for all of them.

**And so it is in this observation and engagement with our gospel this morning, that a revelation occurred within my theological mind that I am pretty fascinated with;**

I will start off by saying that I have been enjoying preaching from the lectionary scriptures because it does present a bigger picture for us to consider; where each week, more of the theological puzzle pieces seems to be coming together for me and my hope is for you as well;

And so with that being said, this scene with Mary and the other disciples at the empty tomb, has a strong resemblance to our transfiguration scripture that I preached on transfiguration Sunday a few weeks ago.

And to recall this story to our memory; Matthew 17 says *Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I[a] will make three dwellings[b] here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."*

**And so what I am seeing happening in our gospel today and what was happening on top of the mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and his brother John is a story that essentially goes hand in hand in my theological engagement;**

Where the transfiguration text that can be found in Matthew, Luke and Mark was essentially a preview or was foreshadowing what Mary and the disciples was about to embark upon in our current gospel today....an empty tomb.

You see in our transfiguration passage in Matthew that I just read, Peter's response to the transfiguration of Jesus and to the return of Elijah and Moses was too memorialize them.

Peter said in my own words; "I know, let's make three dwellings for all of you."

And God's response in my own words was essentially... "no, no....Peter you have it all wrong. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

And what I believe Jesus was hoping that day that the disciples would take away from that moment on the top of the mountain was the concept of resurrection so that they might be transformed by this revelation as well.

We can however, see that the disciples did not get this concept at all.

And the reason why we know that they did not get this concept at all is from our gospel today.

Because in our gospel today, Mary Magdalene is on the scene first with theories that Jesus' body must have been stolen.

Perhaps there were other theories as well that the other disciples had upon the discovery of this empty tomb.

What we do know, is that Peter being one of those disciples who was at the tomb after Mary beckoned him to come; still must not have let the

“dwelling” theory go from our transfiguration lesson; in fact all of the people there maintained the same “dwelling” logic; because they were all expecting Jesus to be inside this dwelling.....but Jesus was not there.

And so after looking at our transfiguration text and God’s response to the disciples then and then looking at our gospel today, I will begin with my theological revelation by asking the question, “why would Jesus be there?”

Because if you think about it, Jesus was trying to plant this seed of a resurrection within the disciples and the people around him for quite some time, but the people couldn’t grasp what Jesus was trying to convey.

In the story of Lazarus who happened to be in the tomb or dwelling; his body began to even smell from being dead for three days; Jesus planted a seed of resurrection by telling Lazarus to come on out....

And one of the greatest celebratory pieces of Black preaching and theology that I have been trained in is that Jesus had to call Lazarus out by name particularly, for if he would have just yelled in the tomb, “Come on out,” that every body who was dead no matter how long, would have been raised from the dead!

In our transfiguration scripture, the reappearance of Elijah and Moses and the transfiguration of Jesus revealing him to be brilliantly dazzling white; most biblical scholars will acknowledge that this was another seed that Jesus was attempting to plant within his disciples of resurrection; letting the disciples know that a dwelling would not be necessary for the perishable body for there will be a day where *our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.* (1 Corinthians 15:53)

Not to mention there were many parables that Jesus told that contained glimpses of this resurrection that Jesus I believe wanted humanity to understand and hold onto as their source of hope.

**So taking all of this in, I would raise the question again, why did they expect Jesus to be there?**

So you see church family, the tomb was physically empty this is a historical fact.

But where I see the good news as I now shift these scriptural texts to the heart of where you and I are today **solely depends on how you** and I might choose to respond to this historical fact.

The good news really depends on how you and I choose to respond to not just the emptiness that is within this tomb, but perhaps the emptiness that might surround us.

Jesus in all of his teachings from my theological perspective, has been trying to convey to humanity over and over again, that there is more to this thing called life than what meets the eye.

Jesus in all of his teachings has been trying to convey to humanity that there is a transfiguration that is happening right before our eyes, but the invitation is this; “do we choose to see it?”

Do we choose to accept it?

Is our metaphorical glass half full or is it half empty?

Is emptiness truly all that there is; or does emptiness create an opportunity for something more?

You and I get to choose to decide this.

**This train of thought that I have been sharing reminds me of my first week at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa where I was pursuing**

my Masters of Divinity almost 8 years ago.

I had a conversation with one of my colleagues and we were talking about Jesus...because that is what good theological students do right?! We talk about Jesus!

And we had a good discussion about justice and love and other teachings of Jesus Christ. Then we started to talk about Easter and resurrection and what the resurrection meant to us and my colleague then stated to me, "I do not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ." And I tell you, the high Christology thinker I was trained to be, suffered whiplash on that day, as I whipped my head back to do a double take and say to him, "What do you mean that you don't believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead?"

I tell you I was shocked, I was confused...I wondered what type of seminary had I got myself enrolled into.....folks, that statement led me into a crisis of faith! I just couldn't wrap my head around such a conviction.

And so I remembered this dialogue raising a lot of theological questions within me.

Is the good news that the tomb was empty?

Is the good news that Jesus was able to reveal himself to Mary as the gardener who was later recognized by Mary as Jesus?

Is the good news that Mary and the women at the tomb had the same story of seeing Jesus?

Is the good news that Jesus physically rose from the dead?

Church I really had to wrestle with this new theological revelation that not every one believed as I believed and so I had really ask myself...what is it that I believe about this Jesus Christ?

Because church I have said this before and I will say it again, I do not want to keep missing these transfiguration/resurrection moments in my life if they are truly there.

I do not want to keep placing Jesus in a box/dwelling or myself for that matter.

I want to be able to experience everything that God has in store for me and more.... This was the reason for my soul searching on any of this.

**Now this is where I will not impose my Christology on you whether or not Jesus actually rose from the dead or if this is purely allegorical or symbolic. ...I'll leave that for you to consider. But I will share with you my theological stance.**

**I believe wholeheartedly in the physical, tangible, perceivable, spiritual and communal resurrection of Jesus Christ.**

Through the gardener at the empty tomb, I believe that Jesus resurrection was perceivable.

On the walk to Emmaus, I believe that Jesus resurrection was perceivable, spiritual and communal.

In the book of John in front of the disciples including Thomas, I believe that Jesus' resurrection was physical, tangible, perceivable, spiritual and communal. I believe that our Lord is just that good.

Where Jesus can be seen in a meal, seen in a conversation, seen in a crowd and seen with our own two eyes unmistakably and very much real. So for me Jesus resurrection is not limited. For me that is the mystery of Jesus Christ revealed at its finest that involves a resurrection that is not an

either/or but a both/and.

However for me, the good news does not completely reside in these statements that I have just declared. The good news for me becomes the good news completely once we are able to see.

The good news is once we are able to look at something that might look to be barren or empty or even devoid of any hope or promise and see that a transfiguration is happening... see that improvement is happening... see that life is still happening and that it is still beautiful....

In fact it is still as beautiful as the day it was created...

For Easter may not have occurred the way we have wanted it to occur....

In fact life in general I can say at least for me, is not what I have been used to...

It feels strange to me...

Sometimes it even feels empty to me...this life we are all in, as I drive down for instance in the Haymarket and not see the streets filled with cars and people and buzzing shops and more....

But then I think about Mary.....sweet Mary who affirms within me that just like God chose her to be there for such a time as this; God also chose you and I to be here to witness this emptiness.....

Mary was filled with shock, terror, grief and fear.....

But it wasn't until she got to see the gardener....in fact, thank God in the midst of all that she was feeling that she was able to see the gardener....that she recognized that the tomb was not empty at all, but instead what was there was hope....she could have missed it...the good news is that she didn't miss it. The good news is that she was able to see.

My prayer is that as we look at our own Easter 2020 that on the surface may seem just as empty; that you and I will be able to see also that God is with us....God will never leave or forsake us....

Let the People of God say Amen.

Peace and Love!

Kirstie J. Engel

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