

Sermon – “The Fullness of an Empty Tomb”
Scripture Readings – Colossians 3:1-4, John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Colossians 3:1-4. In the joyous festival of Easter, Christians proclaim that God triumphs even over death itself. Easter is not a celebration of the renewal of the earth in spring (although this is lovely). Easter is not even a celebration of the astounding event of the resuscitation of an individual (something for which we are grateful). Rather, Easter is the celebration of the faithfulness and the power of God to overcome death. Paul challenges the faithful brothers and sisters of Christ in Colossae to take their cues from the resurrection in the way they live their lives. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

And now, let us open the scriptures to the reading of the events that took place on that first Easter morning as they are recorded by “the other disciple” in the Gospel of John, chapter 20. Hear now God’s Holy Word. (Read John 20:1-18.)

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" Ra BOONE' E (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. Amen.

*The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.*

The title of the sermon: "The Fullness of an Empty Tomb"

*The text: ...for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.
John 20:9*

Let us pray. Many of us seek you Lord, but like Mary, we don't expect to find you, and the last thing we anticipate is to find you alive, to experience the fullness of your presence in an empty tomb. May we encounter you today. Amen.

Today, I wear turquoise in honor of Marie Mattingly Richter. I was 26 and she was 72 when Marie befriended me soon after my arrival at the Belleville congregation. When Marie invited me to her home for lunch, I was delighted and when I walked into her front door, I was surprised to discover one of the most brightly painted homes I had ever entered. A humble, Frank Lloyd Wright style dwelling designed and built by her husband Paul; Marie's living room and kitchen were both painted in a bright turquoise which I soon learned was her favorite color. In fact, much of what Marie owned was turquoise!

Over the years we became close friends as she shared the stories that shaped her life. Marie lost her father when she was only 11 years old. He died unexpectedly in Albuquerque, New Mexico on one of his many business trips. I suppose it's fair to say turquoise reminded Marie of the jewelry her father brought her when she was a little girl.

When Marie's father died, she and her mother moved to Murphysboro, Illinois where they survived the historic 1925 Tri-state Tornado that took the lives of 243 persons in Murphysboro alone, wiping out almost the entire town. Marie, who was 14 at the time, was buried alive inside her school and pulled out of the rubbish by her principal. She remembered walking home with only one shoe and upon her arrival, found one side of her house gone. Because of the threat of fire, she and her mother were given a short time to pack their belongings in small suitcases. Their home burned to the ground that night.

Marie's older brother, Douglas, who worked for the railroad in East St. Louis journeyed by train to Murphysboro to look for Marie and his mother. He found them living in a refugee camp and brought them home to East St. Louis where Marie began a new life, attending East St. Louis High School and meeting her husband-to-be, Paul Richter.

During the depression Paul worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps supervising the building of the Marquette Lodge in the State Park of Grafton. I have thought of Marie and Paul on more than one occasion overlooking beautiful Lake Springfield these last six months, which was also built in part because of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's. I marvel at the creations that have risen from the depths of the depression and the invincible spirit of the men and women who persevered these devastating times.

In later years Marie and Paul maintained their unconquerable independence, living in their brightly painted home well into their nineties. During these years one autumn day, a concerned neighbor called their son Jan who lived out of town with the news that his 95 year old father was on the roof of their home removing leaves. Jan telephoned his dad almost immediately and told him in no uncertain terms that he was not to go on their roof. Paul reluctantly agreed. A few days later Jan received another call from the same neighbor and he said "Don't tell me my father is on the roof again!" To which the neighbor replied, "No, this time it's your mother!"

The image of my friend Marie on that roof in her nineties, the little girl who was buried alive and miraculously pulled out of the rubbish resonates with me on this Easter morning as a metaphor of the resurrection. Marie was a woman acquainted with grief and loss and yet, she lived for 100 years in the fullness of a quiet, joyful faith, surrounded by beautiful and bright colors. Yes, I wear turquoise today in honor of Marie Mattingly Richter, who lived a life of joy and gratitude, who rose to the circumstances life presented her and who experienced resurrection in the unexpected gift of new life on more than one occasion.

Today we celebrate and remember the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We proclaim with Christians around the world that death is not the last word, that the love of God could not be contained in the tomb. When the women returned following the Sabbath to anoint the body of Christ, the stone was rolled away, the light was shining in and Jesus was miraculously gone, nowhere to be found, in absentia. Part of the paradox of the Christian faith is that Christ's absence in the tomb is as significant as his presence on the cross because just as we find life in Christ's death, we discover Christ's presence only in his unexpected absence.

Let's go back together to that first Easter morning and walk in the sandals of Mary Magdalene, the first person to encounter the Risen Lord. The news of the empty tomb did not initially bring Mary joy. She was beside herself with grief, wanting desperately to locate her Lord's missing body. She wanted to hold him, to touch him, she had come to mourn and to anoint his body.

As we read together, Mary was slow to recognize Jesus, which is understandable. Finding an empty tomb was the last thing she expected that morning. Only when Christ speaks her name does she realize whom she has encountered. *'Mary!'* Each of us knows that joy of hearing our name spoken by the familiar and tender voice of one whom we respect and love; and whose presence in our life gives us meaning and identity.

Then Jesus unexpectedly says to her. Do not hold on to me,'

It wasn't Jesus' intention to hurt Mary with these words...or to put her off. He loved Mary dearly and wanted to comfort her and wipe away her tears. Never the less, Jesus needed to let Mary know he wasn't able to stay. He didn't want her to mistake his appearance for permanent presence. That presence could only come by way of the spirit after he ascends; that presence can only come in his physical absence.

Instead of holding on to a relationship they treasured, Mary is asked to let go and to go to prepare the disciples so they can begin to understand the words Christ spoke only a few days prior at the last meal they shared.

Nevertheless I tell you the truth (Jesus said); it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate (the Holy Spirit) will not come to you. If I go, I will send this one to you who will teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said to you.

The disciples did not understand these words just as we have difficulty comprehending how it is to our advantage for someone we love to be absent from us. And yet, as Henri Nouwen articulates in his book The Living Reminder one of the mysteries of life is that memory can often bring us closer to another than can physical presence. In memory we are able see each other in

a new way. This is what Jesus was trying to say before his departure. Only in memory would the disciples experience the full meaning of whom they had the joy of encountering in Jesus Christ.

The great mystery of Easter is *that God entered into intimacy with us not only by Christ's coming, but also by Christ's leaving. Indeed, it is in Christ's absence that our intimacy is so profound we can say Christ dwells in us and experience Christ as the center of our being.*

Today is a day of celebration, a day to remember. Today is a day to wear turquoise! We have discovered life in death, joy in sorrow and God's presence in an unforeseen absence. We have discovered the fullness of an empty tomb and we, like Mary, have the privilege of an unexpected encounter with our Living God and Risen Lord. May it be so. Amen.