

April 16, 2017
Matthew 28:1-10
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“Empty Space”

Good morning. I stand before you to preach this morning, knowing that you may not believe what I have to tell you. It might be because you don't know me and aren't sure if you can trust me, or because you do know me and have decided not to trust me, or simply that what I'm here to tell you is pretty hard to believe and impossible to prove. But what I have to say is true, whether you believe it or not, and it's something I am compelled to say: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. The tomb is empty. He's not there.

I actually have a little more planned to say, but if that's all you remember, I have done my work here. I stand in good company proclaiming that Christ is risen; and if you're skeptical, you have plenty of company, too. Our text this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew, but each of the gospels includes an account of Jesus' resurrection. Although the accounts are similar, they are not exactly the same. If a public official had tweeted these gospel accounts, the press would have pounced on the inconsistencies and discredited the story immediately. Were there soldiers there or not? Was there one angel or two? How many women were there? Where did they see Jesus? Was he immediately recognizable? Which is it?

There are a couple of points on which the gospels are consistent: the large stone which had been used to seal the tomb had been moved so the tomb was open. There was no body in the tomb. The first people to discover this were women who were followers of Jesus who were going to the tomb at daybreak on Sunday. This last part, although it's consistent, is a bit troubling: not the daybreak on Sunday morning part, but the fact that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women. Women can't really be trusted -- they're hysterical, flighty. In the ancient world, in the Middle East of Jesus' time and even until a

few hundred years ago in the West, women weren't allowed to testify in a court of law, because well, who can believe a *woman*? They'll say anything. It's almost like the gospel writers are going out of their way to concoct a story that no one is going to believe. In fact, Matthew's account includes a paragraph which comes immediately after the verses Elizabeth read for us about the false story the Jewish leaders paid the guards to tell; Matthew knew even before his gospel was written that folks had already discredited the story.

Well friends, I'm here to tell you that I am proud to stand in the company of unreliable women; those followers of Jesus who were the last ones to leave the foot of the cross, and the first ones to show up after the Sabbath to mourn at the tomb. I'm willing to tell this story whether other people believe it or not, because the importance of the story is not in *your* ability to independently verify all the data; the importance of the story is in my willingness to tell it -- whether you believe it or not--as imperfect and unreliable as I am.

Here's why this story is difficult from any biological, physiological, phenomena-logical perspective: it isn't logical. The important part of the resurrection story is what isn't there. Not if there are soldiers, or how many angels, or which women, or exactly what the resurrected Jesus looks or sounds like. The important part of this story is what is in the tomb on Sunday morning. And that is empty space: it's tough to build a convincing story on the witness of between one and three hysterical women and empty space.

You'd think empty space is a pretty cheap commodity -- maybe even worthless. Who needs it? But in the right circumstances, empty space is incredibly significant. Last week, United Airlines needed an empty seat for a crew member on a flight out of Chicago. Problem was, there was already a passenger seated in that empty space. He didn't accept the airline's offer of \$800 or \$1000 to vacate that space. The video of him being dragged off the plane screaming has gone viral and created an international incident and huge PR mess. United Airlines will be paying for that empty space for a long time.

We put a lot of effort into organizing and clearing things out of our homes -- and some people have put a lot of effort into clearing things out of this church building and garage -- so that we can have more

space. We pay a lot of money for bigger cars or bigger homes so that we can have more space: if all that space were filled with stuff, it wouldn't be functional at all. There has to be empty space in order for it to be functional space. Otherwise it's just a storage unit.

The empty space of the tomb on Easter morning may be the most significant empty space in history. That empty space started a movement -- not even a religion at first, but a way of living which was based on the life and ministry and non-violent witness of Jesus Christ. This empty space is why we gather every week--and why that day is Sunday -- to read and remember and proclaim Jesus' life and the way it continues to shape our lives. If the tomb is empty, then the rules we thought we knew about life and death are not rules, they're kind of guidelines: there's some force greater than the power of death at work in this game. That empty space is a game-changer.

God changed the rules that Sunday morning nearly two thousand years ago with the empty space of the resurrection, but the significance of the story is our willingness to tell it. Not just each year on Easter Sunday, but in the way we make that empty space a part of our lives. If we claim to be Christians, but live lives which are empty of hope or joy, we have incorporated the wrong empty space. The story of the resurrection is difficult enough to believe without contradicting it by living as if we have no hope and death has the last word. In fact, the only way we are likely to convince anyone of the truth of resurrection and the promise of life in Jesus Christ is if they experience it in their interactions with us. It isn't a story that is very convincing all by itself. If the empty space of the tomb doesn't change anything: the meaning of Christ's crucifixion, the reality of grace and forgiveness, of death and eternal life, your desire to be a follower of Jesus -- why bother with that story at all?

When my middle daughter, Becca, was 2- $\frac{1}{2}$ years old, I helped with an Easter Egg hunt at our church. Then, as now, we ordered a lot of our gift supplies through Oriental Trading Co. They got part of our order mixed up with some other church -- we got it straightened out, but the end result was that we ended up with 3 or 4 ceramic crucifixes. We weren't going to give those out with the Easter candy, but I took one home and Becca latched on to it. She called it her "Dead Jesus on the Cross" and carried it around the house and even when we went

to the library or grocery shopping. I'd be in the grocery check out or at the print shop, and she'd pull it out and ask the clerk, "Want to see my dead Jesus on the cross?" Becca was pretty cute, but I'm sure they thought I was some kind of nut for giving my toddler a crucifix.

The image of Jesus on the cross is powerful one, one which we have seen a lot over the past week. But Jesus on the cross it is not the end of the story. That cross is empty. The tomb is empty. He is no longer there. The one who was dead is risen. If that empty space doesn't make you feel like shouting Alleluia! then this has been a rough service. Spoiler alert: we still have a closing hymn and this postlude by George Fredrick Handel chock full of Halleluiahs. If rejoicing in the empty space of the tomb is difficult for you, I would offer the following: Halleluiah, which means praise the Lord, should not be something which we simply say; it is a command for how we are to live. It is not a promise of an easy life or a painless one; it certainly didn't work out that way for Jesus. But if you believe in the empty space in the tomb on Easter morning, or even if you're not sure, but you're looking for something to fill the empty space in your own life, than Halleluiah is a fine place to start. Can you imagine a life filled with joy and hope and possibility? Can you think of ways that God has brought new life out of experiences of loss or death -- death of a relationship, a job, an opinion, a judgment -- in your own life? What would it take to choose hope and joy? What do you have to lose?

We are called to live as people of the resurrection; people who know that for those who believe this incredible story, death is not the end. We have good news to proclaim -- near and far, over the hills and everywhere. The tomb is empty. Jesus is not there. He is risen. Alleluia!