



The Trinity Pulpit



A “Hole” Lotta Nothing or A Whole Lotta Something?

John 20:1-18

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Astronomers have found what they call the giant empty “hole”. It is a massive place in the universe that is a gigantic hole. The hole is nearly a billion light years across. Inside the hole there are no planets, stars, galaxies or gases. It is just one big, cold spot. The distance in space between stars is sometimes beyond our ability to comprehend. One light year equals six trillion miles. This big empty hole is about a billion light years across. Now, that is one big hole. So, if you are a scientist, that hole in space is a whole lot of something, but for us who are consumed with life on earth, it is a whole lot of nothing.

Empty spaces can be nothing or they can be something of great importance. Only time and research will tell us the significance of the giant empty of space, but we want to consider another empty space. It is a much smaller empty space which can mean nothing or it can mean everything. I am, of course, speaking of the empty tomb. The tomb of Jesus was a borrowed tomb, in a garden of tombs; it was a new tomb and it was hewn into the rock. It is large enough for someone to be able to go inside and sit down – larger than a grave but not a large room. It definitely is smaller than the giant empty of space. It is really just a small dark space, but it being empty that morning after the Passover Sabbath has brought us all to this place today. We have come here because of an empty space. That small empty space can be a whole lot of nothing or a whole lot of something. It really matters what you choose to believe.

I enjoy reading the accounts of the resurrection, because if you read them closely, you find that each gospel writer chose to emphasize different parts of the story. Some emphasized the angels rolling back the stone. Others just found the tomb open. Some emphasized Jesus’ interaction with Mary and others the role of Peter and John. John included the story of Thomas and the appearing in the Upper Room. They all emphasized different aspects of the resurrection story. However, there are three common experiences in the resurrection stories that I want us to focus on for a few moments. Those three experiences are emptiness, bewilderment, and faith. I want us to think about these experiences, because I believe that most of us have arrived at Easter experiencing one of these Easter experiences.



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Some of us have arrived at Easter empty. There was plenty of emptiness to go around that first Easter. The women, including Mary, who made their way to the tomb that morning, had been left empty by the events of Friday. They must have thought “Jesus is dead! How can that be? How can a person be here one moment and be gone the next? How can things go wrong so quickly? It was just a week ago that Jesus entered Jerusalem to hosannas. How in the world can things go sour so quickly?” No one would have ever imagined such an ending to the life of this loving and compassionate man. But it was true. They had seen it

with their own eyes; they had watched the crucifixion. They did not let Jesus die alone; they went with him to the end. But when the end came, there was nothing but emptiness.

The disciples were experiencing the void as well. They were afraid and filled with uncertainty which is what loss does to you. Three years of their lives seemed to be for nothing. All of the sacrifice had led not to reward but to nothing. It had ended so abruptly. As odd as it had all began with their meeting Jesus, it had ended with betrayal and death. They felt they had lost to the power of this world. The authority and power of the Sadducees and Pharisees and their connections to the Romans had been too much. "Who says you can change the world? Don't kid yourself." It was over. They were left with nothing – nothing but emptiness.

If you arrive at Easter with emptiness, then you are in good company. That is how everyone arrived that first Easter: with emptiness, and what they found was more emptiness. Our world has done a lot lately to leave us empty. Some of you come to Easter wanting to celebrate and believe, but the emptiness is too much. Maybe your emptiness comes from the loss of one you loved. Just like the women on their way to the tomb, you have taken your own journey to a graveside this year. Maybe your emptiness is like that of the disciples. All of their work had come to nothing. For you it might be a job loss or the loss of a dream that leaves you empty. What you were sure would be, is not going to be. Where you thought you were going, turned out to be only a hope and now, seems impossible. The result is emptiness.

It could just be the feeling of uncertainty that we all are experiencing in our world today. Uncertainty can lead us to emptiness. That first Easter truly had uncertainty. What now? That was the question that was unspoken in the hearts of all those in the story. It is the question we all have these days, but many of us hold it inside and try to deal with it without others knowing we are worried about the future. We have to be strong, but there is emptiness from uncertainty.

If emptiness is your experience this Easter, then please know that emptiness is the way that Easter begins. It is the common experience of everyone in the resurrection stories. Maybe that is because Easter cannot really happen without there first be-

ing emptiness. Emptiness has the ability to create in us a sense of desire for something. It is the very feeling of emptiness which reminds us that something is missing; something is not quite right. We realize that we are unfulfilled and incomplete. Emptiness creates the conversation with self that there must be something more.

The Desert Fathers embraced emptiness as a way of leading to joy. They saw tears as not something to be avoided but something that was a gift from God. Emptiness is a coming to one's self. It is when, finally, we see the contradiction between whom we are and where God calls us to be.

Emptiness is a common experience in the Bible. It is the experience of the prodigal son who ate from the pig's trough in a strange land; then, he came to himself. He realized that this was not what was intended for his life. He got up and went back to his father. Emptiness is the picture of Job who had been struck down by life in every way; yet, through his tears, he chose to bless God. Emptiness is the picture of Jesus on the cross, forsaken by all others, yet obediently giving his very life into the hands of the Father. Emptiness is the beginning of the Easter experience.

Emptiness is a beginning place for faith. But emptiness, in itself, is not the answer. Please notice that no one stays at the empty tomb. No one goes in, sits down, and remains. They go in and some, like Mary, just peek in; once they experience the emptiness, they assume it leads to something else. If you come with emptiness to Easter, you are in good company, but emptiness need not be the end of your story.

There is a second characteristic in the resurrection stories that intrigues me. This is the response of confusion or bewilderment. We find it in all the accounts. In Matthew, the women were afraid, yet filled with joy. In Mark, they went away frightened and bewildered. In Luke, the story of the women sounded like nonsense; so, Peter went to the tomb and walked away wondering what had happened. In John, we are told that Mary did not recognize Jesus and thought he was the Gardner. She did not recognize Jesus even after she had found the stone rolled away and had angels speak to her. She was still asking "Where have you moved his body?" In John, we also have the story of Thomas' insistence on seeing Jesus for himself.

In Matthew, at the moment of the great commission, we are told that they saw Jesus and worshiped him but some doubted.

What we have throughout our resurrection stories are feelings of confusion and bewilderment. The women were filled with joy but also frightened. They were torn about the way they should respond. They wanted to believe but were not quite sure they should. Peter found the tomb empty and was still not convinced that resurrection had taken place. He was just not sure. Thomas, even with the others having given testimony, was skeptical. Others even saw Jesus alive; yet, while others were worshipping, they doubted.

This year, Easter might find you in a time of confusion and bewilderment. What is happening in your life has just left you confused. You are not sure how you are to feel or respond. You desire to respond in obedience to Jesus, but you are not sure what that means. You want to do what is right but you are frozen at a fork in the road, and as far as you can see, each path looks the same. Life has left you confused and bewildered. You would almost prefer emptiness to confusion. At least, in emptiness you know what you feel. Confusion is frustrating.

I think the feeling of confusion and bewilderment in our resurrection stories are the result of two questions. The first question is “What is God doing?” The second question is “Is God doing anything at all?” Those are really our questions of confusion as well. When we find ourselves in the middle of confusing times, we begin to question what God is doing. If we could be certain of what direction God is going or what God’s activity is in a situation, then we could know for sure what we should do. Yet, sometimes we are left wondering to ourselves. The women knew God was doing something; they had seen angels, been told that Jesus was alive, and been given instructions to go and tell his disciples; yet, they went torn about how they should feel. They were filled with joy about what God might be doing; however, they were afraid of what was occurring. That is exactly how we feel in our moments of confusion.

The other question is harder: “Is God doing anything?” Some that day did not see God at work, at least not at first. Mary knew the stone had been rolled away, and she assumed that someone had taken his body. She was not thinking that God was at work but that grave robbers had been at work. Peter and the others heard the testimony of the women, and they did not assume God was at work; they said “Their words sound like nonsense.”

Those two questions come to us in our confusion and bewilderment. Is God at work? If so, what is God doing? This is the root of their confusion and bewilderment and ours, as well. What are we to do if we come to Easter bewildered? We can find comfort in knowing that we don’t have to have all the facts before we can have faith. We don’t have to have life all figured out before God can be real to us. We can live with mystery and still live with Jesus.

Faith is not the point when everything makes sense. Faith is hope for things yet unseen and experienced. Faith is a relationship with someone in the face of uncertainty. There is room for bewilderment and confusion on Easter.

There is one more common experience that makes all the difference on Easter. They did not remain in the emptiness of the loss and the tomb. They didn’t even remain in their confusion. They had an experience that moved them to faith. That experience was that they each encountered the living Jesus. Mary’s life was transformed in the moment Jesus spoke her name. That evening, Jesus came to the disciples and appeared to them; they were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Thomas experienced him, bowed down, and said “My Lord and my God.” When they had their own encounter with the living Jesus, they moved from emptiness and confusion to faith. It was not the empty tomb or the story of the others that made the difference; it is the personal experience.

Which brings us to the most important question of Easter: have you had your own encounter with the living Lord Jesus? John wrote these words at the end of his account of the resurrection in John 20:30-31.



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Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may life in his name.

The central focus of Easter is not the empty tomb, as important and historic as I believe it to be. It is not even the testimony of those who encountered Jesus. The focus of Easter is that Jesus is alive. Jesus is alive right now, and through the Holy Spirit, is present with us right now, in this place, and in this moment. Easter is about you and me having our own encounter with the living Lord so that we might have life in his name.

Blaise Pascal was a great mathematician, philosopher and physicist. He observed that the human heart is an infinite abyss. In other words, the human heart is a giant empty. He discovered that we human beings try in vain to fill our hearts with everything around us: education, jobs, homes, money, friends, and family; however, none of these things can help, since the abyss can be filled with only one infinite, immutable object. The only thing that can fill the giant empty that is the human

heart is God. Pascal, in all of his brilliance, discovered that only one thing could fill the human heart: a relationship with God through the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

How do you come to Easter? Do you come with the emptiness of loss and pain? Does your emptiness beg the question that there must be something more to life than you are experiencing? Do you come confused by the events of life? Are you wondering what God is doing or if God is doing anything at all? Both of these are natural reactions to life and were found at that first Easter. Yet, what makes all the difference in the world is moving beyond them to faith. Have you personally encountered Jesus? It is a relationship with Jesus that really matters this Easter. It is what changed the experience of the empty tomb from emptiness and confusion to joy and celebration.

The empty tomb can be a 'hole' lot of nothing or a whole lot of something. What makes the difference is experiencing the resurrected Christ in the center of your life this day and every day to come. ❀

