



“Empty, Empty, Empty”

Pastor Andy CastroLang

April 12, 2020

Easter

Scripture (NRSV):

John 20:1-2, 11-18

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

¹¹ Now, Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] 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,^[b] “Rabbouni!” (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.

Sermon:

The highways are empty. The schools are empty. Our church this morning is dark and empty. I will confess to you that my arms ache because they are empty of the hugs and greetings that I long to share with you.

But the tomb is empty, too. The cross is empty, too.

The cross is the most savage and brutal tool of a cruel and violent empire. It is empty.

The tomb that held the victim of this violent crime...ah, now, that is empty, too.

Mary's heart, as she goes to that tomb, is broken and empty of hope. I believe the disciples were weary, ashamed, and empty of hope as well.

This emptiness cannot be escaped. This lack of hope, of joy, of love and laughter cannot be ignored. Indeed, the disciples are enveloped in fear of a fate as dreadful as that of Jesus.

So, they huddle in shame, in anger, in sorrow.

They have been in hiding for days, self-isolating, quarantined in fear.

I have heard a number of spiritual leaders say that we are living a long Holy Saturday. We are living a time of isolation, of fear, of desolating loneliness. A time spent just hanging on. No plans can be made. Each day full of hard things. Yes, perhaps our entire world is in a long, long, long Holy Saturday...

And when Mary goes to the tomb, it is a new day, but she expects only more of what she already knows; more sorrow, more grief. Another day of the familiar ache of grief and loss.

An empty tomb is unexpected, and yet another indignity.

Easter doesn't bowl Mary over. She is so immersed in grief, the messengers of God, the angels, are not messengers of joy to her, but merely bearers of more heartbreaking news. Her beloved friend is gone, her world is shattered.

Where has he gone? What has happened to all she longed for, dreamed of, worked for?

My dear friends, Easter is a strange event...because when Mary does turn and see Jesus, the Risen One...he is totally unexpected, and she does not recognize him.

On the other side of suffering and death, Jesus stands resurrected. And he is so surprising, his presence so different, that he is unrecognized!

From wretched and suffering, tortured and murdered.... to being mistaken for a gardener, a gentle man, nurturing the life of growing things.

What can this mean?!

One thing for sure...on the other side of death, God's resurrected Christ stands alive, yet changed. It will take a while to realize our Messiah is there!

I believe that when we stand alive on the other side of this scourge of a pandemic, we will find our world changed. We might not recognize it at first.

And it is my prayer that like Mary, we will NOT cling to the past, the way it was before. Jesus asks her not to cling, I ask all of us not to cling to the past either.

When we come to the other side of this pandemic, we will find a new day, and a new reality.

- Will we be willing to believe it? Will we recognize it?
- Can we give ourselves to the world that is going to be, at the end of this long, long, Holy Saturday wait?
- Can we find the fullness of hope, live our lives in love and hope; even when our schools and restaurants, our stores and our streets are empty?
- Shall we look with hope to the day we come out of quarantine, and into a new day, changed and full of possibility, ready to build a different future?

I want to share with you a few words to close, from our Conference Minister, Mike Denton: I know it can seem strange to celebrate in the middle of so much else going on in the world.

Let's celebrate, anyway.

Draw down into that wellspring of hope and drink deeply.

Remember that these days will not last forever.

Remember that love transcends every boundary.

Nestle into a peace that comforts and surrounds us.

Christ is risen, good people. Christ is risen indeed.

Alleluia! And Amen.