

CCI SERMON EASTER John 20: 1- 18 The Stone is Gone

I'm going to say a word and I want you to call out the first thing that comes to your mind with that word. Ready? EMPTY.

You reach for milk for your cereal, and find the milk jug EMPTY. Your car grinds to a stop and you look at the gas gauge... EMPTY. You reach for toilet paper and the roll is EMPTY.

Empty wallet. Empty nest. Out of energy, we say "running on empty."

But today... as we celebrate an empty cross and an empty tomb, EMPTY is a great word.

In our scripture reading it had been three days since the disciples had watched as Jesus died on the cross. Three days since they had taken his dead body down from the cross, wrapped it in cloth strips, covered his face with a face cloth, and laid him in a tomb. Three days of tears and sorrow that their teacher had died, three days of fear that the soldiers would soon come for them too, three days of wondering what to do now. They had pinned their future on Jesus and now he was dead.

Then, early on Sunday morning before dawn, some of the women disciples headed back to the tomb with spices to prepare Jesus' body for burial. They hadn't been able to do this on Friday because by the time Jesus had died and the men got permission to take Jesus' body down from the cross, and by the time they carried it to the tomb, it was dusk on Friday evening which was the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, and so they rested as scripture said to do. Matthew, Mark, and Luke name several women who went to the tomb that morning- Mary the mother of James, Joanna, Salome, and Mary Magdalene. But John's gospel focused only on Mary Magdalene, who is the only woman mentioned in all four gospels.

Mary Magdalene was an early disciple of Jesus from the city of Magdala. Luke tells us that she was one of several wealthy women whom Jesus had healed of various diseases and demons Jesus. These women became followers and provided for the financial needs of Jesus and his disciples as they traveled around the region. Over the centuries, traditions arose about Mary Magdalene being a prostitute-turned-convert, but there is no real evidence for that. Most famous paintings of her depict her as a woman of questionable morality, and in the more recent musical, Jesus Christ Superstar, she is portrayed that way. But in John's gospel, she is held in high esteem. Mary Magdalene was among the women who faithfully stood near the cross as Jesus died. She was there to hear Jesus ask John to take care of his mother after he was gone. Mary Magdalene didn't run away in

fear; she faithfully stayed to the end. And now on Easter morning, we find her coming to the tomb to finish preparing Jesus' body.

But when she arrived, the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. Shocked and scared, Mary ran to the homes of Peter and the other disciple to tell them. We don't know who the other disciple was, but most commentators believe it was John who wrote this gospel.

So Peter and the other disciple raced to the tomb and they found it empty just as Mary said. The strips of cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' body were lying in a heap and the face cloth that had covered his face was folded neatly to the side. What had happened here? Who moved the huge stone covering the entrance? Grave robbers? That was Mary's first thought. But why would grave robbers have wasted time unwrapping all the cloth strips around Jesus' body and carry him naked to another location? It would have been more difficult and awkward to do so. And even if they had, they wouldn't have taken the time to carefully fold the face cloth and place it neatly to the side. So what had happened? The clues weren't clear.

John's gospel says that upon seeing the empty tomb, John **believed**. But what did he believe- that Jesus was gone? That was obvious. That Jesus was alive? Not so obvious. They still didn't understand what scripture said about Jesus rising from the dead. They understood enough to know Jesus' body was gone. But if they had truly believed that Jesus was alive, wouldn't they have been filled with joy and told Mary? Yet, Mary was still crying outside the tomb after they went back home.

Mary stayed after the men left. Was she looking for some closure there at the tomb? Mary had come to the tomb to finish applying spices to Jesus' body to slow the decay process. I imagine this act was a closure of sorts... to provide Jesus some dignity after such a horrible death... to make the best of a tragic situation... a last chance to be a faithful servant to this One who had been so important to her. The One who had healed her and taught her about God, and made her feel welcome. Having something to do helps tame the emptiness. We understand the need for closure.

As chaplain, I was called to meet with four daughters after the death of their mother. I had been there earlier in the day before she died, and 3 of the sisters and I had talked together, and prayed together, and I had placed the sign of the cross on the mother's forehead with oil. As I left they were waiting for the fourth sister to arrive and were taking the time to tell their mom how much they loved her. One of the women had arrived that morning after a 24-hour bus ride and was

exhausted. Within an hour of the fourth sister arriving, their mom had smiled deeply and peacefully taken her last breath. It was during our tearful conversation after her death, that everyone grasped that their mother had waited until all the people she loved the most were present so that she could peacefully “go home.” They all had had time for those important last words together, and there was some closure even in their grief.

But there was no closure for Mary there at the tomb as she stayed and cried. Why did Jesus have to die? She could have gone home too... there was plenty for a woman to do to keep busy to dull the pain, but in spite of her questions, in spite of her doubts, she stayed.

And as she wept, Jesus appeared. But she didn't recognize him. Funny how she didn't recognize him. But we understand that too, don't we? Sometimes we don't recognize someone we know very well at work because at work they're dressed in a suit or uniform, but now they're in sweats at the grocery store. And we don't see them. Until they call our name and we recognize the voice. When Jesus called her name, “Mary,” she recognized the voice of the Great Shepherd who had said his sheep know his voice. “*Mary.*” Now she knew him!

And she joyfully reached out to hug him. Like a parent whose child has been in real danger, perhaps at a school shooting, or a car accident, and then you find out they're OK, and you hug them like you'll never let them go.

But Jesus says, “Don't cling to me.” We know what clinging feels like too. Clinging to a reality we have enjoyed, something or someone that has made our life meaningful, something we find hard to let go of even when inside, we know it's time. Clinging to the now too-large home where we raised our kids, even though we can't keep up the house and the yard, and the stairs are getting hard to climb. Clinging to things we have no room for. Clinging to the car even when everyone tells us it's time to let it go before we accidentally hurt someone. Clinging to church the way we've known it even when that form of church no longer speaks to the people of today. Clinging to a past hurt. Clinging...we all do it. Jesus tells Mary and us not to waste time clinging to the past, because clinging to the past will keep us from grabbing hold of the new future he has for us.

Mary models letting go for us, and she grabs hold of the new Easter reality. She gets to be the first person to share the news about Jesus' resurrection. Mary, a woman, gets to be the first witness, at a time when women weren't even allowed to be a witness in a court. Mary gets to tell the story. Even their relationship with God had changed. “Go tell my brothers that I will soon return to my Father and

your Father, my God and your God.” Did you hear His words? “My Father and your Father? My God and your God?” Before this, Jesus had called God “My Father,” or “the Father.” Now he calls all Jesus’ followers brothers and sisters with God as “our shared Father.” It’s why he taught us to pray together, “Our Father who art in heaven...” The empty tomb was no longer a tragedy; Jesus is alive and brings us a new relationship with God, and a new purpose in life- to tell Jesus’ story. The tears are gone. Can you hear Mary singing on her way to tell Peter and the others?
Because He Lives, I can face tomorrow....

Here we are again on Easter morning with its outlandish story that a dead man lives. Some of us come to this story like Peter and the other disciple- with very reasonable doubts and questions. And we may leave today like them, shaking our heads because we can’t seem to reason our way through the unexplainable. We may push the doubts and questions aside, but they rumble around in our souls anyway. Could it be true? Nah... it’s religious stuff. But, then again, what if it is true? Some of us come like Mary clinging to something that gets in the way of seeing the new thing God is doing. Clinging to something that can’t bring the life or peace or joy we long for no matter how hard we cling to it. Some of us come with an empty spot inside that we try to ignore by staying busy working, spending time with friends, drinking or eating, watching TV, anything to avoid the sensation that as good as life may be, there’s still an empty spot inside. We may come as believers, but it’s been a long time since Jesus was as real to us as our family and friends are. Jesus is someone we believe about- like George Washington- not someone we know and believe in, and follow.

Jesus invites us all to a fresh heart-to-heart encounter this Easter morning, invites us to not be afraid to come near, and to stick around like Mary, in spite of our doubts and questions. Read his story for yourself, and listen for his voice calling your name. He invites you not to give up just because the answers you once got don’t satisfy anymore. Stick around. Let go of what we’re clinging to and give the risen Christ a chance because what he offers is so much better than what we’re clinging to. And that hole inside that lingers? That’s a place God created for a relationship with himself that nothing else will fill no matter how hard you try. The excitement and purpose we lost somewhere? We’ll find that at the empty tomb too. There’s life finding Jesus at the empty tomb.

As we prepare to sing our closing hymn, In Christ Alone, we have an opportunity to accept Jesus’ invitation for a fresh encounter and find what we long

for. He's ready and waiting, can we hear Him call our name? *Mary... you came to my tomb, will you come to Me?*