

[Readings VIGIL: Gn 1:1-2:2; Ex 14:15-15:1, Is 54:5-14; Rom 6:3-1; Lk: 24:1-12; EASTER SUNDAY: [Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Psalm 118; Col 3:1-48; John 20:1-9]

What do we do with *nothing*? This may seem like a meaningless question at first. Nothing is a vacuum, an absence, a void. You can't do anything with nothing. If you've got nothing in your pocket, for example -- or nothing in your heart, your home, or your life -- that kind of emptiness is a real poverty. On that original Easter morning, the sight of the empty tomb must have seemed like that, at first glance. A great void, a terrible absence, an aching poverty of presence, power, and hope.

If being with Jesus was the experience of absolute fullness, then the empty tomb was a chasm as wide and lonely as Hell itself. Jesus had brought all the realities of Heaven into every moment, the power and wisdom and glory of God into the present hour. He called that experience of totality "the Kingdom," a place where healing is possible, forgiveness is real, and faith is the only sensible response. Imagine having walked with Jesus, seen His authority, heard His teaching, been touched by His healing hands. And then imagine what it was like to lose all of that, to peer into a small dark hole from which even the shrouded body of the One who was your leader seemed to have vanished.

What can you do with nothing? Some will always find this condition grounds for despair. But even this choice betrays the truth of the matter: Nothing is, in its essence, fertile ground. Nothing is the place where something begins. In fact, if we take Genesis seriously, nothing is the condition from which everything that exists sprang into being. The spirit of God breathes over the void, and light illuminates the darkness, and life itself yawns, stretches, and moves.

We find ourselves in the same situation as Peter's audience at the home of Cornelius: We know all about what happened that Easter morning -- or at least, we know what others have said about it. We know, from the privileged distance of 20 centuries, why that tomb is empty on this fateful morning. But like that early, eager household of Gentiles, we may still find ourselves in a holding pattern, not really sure what this emptiness means -- what it means for us, that is.

OK, so Jesus is risen, alleluia; card-carrying Christians by and large don't dispute this aspect of the story.

But many of us still share the incomprehension of Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple who come to the tomb, poke their heads in, see nothing, and don't know what to make of it. We know what has happened, what faithful people down through the centuries say has happened. We recite the consequence of this event in every creed: the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. But seldom do we translate that great absence on Easter morning into something more.

What if we went for something more immediate and obvious? Easter transforms nothing into everything. In this sense, it's a genesis event, as open to possibility as the first creation was. Easter translates emptiness into fullness, death into unending life, and despair into boundless hope.

Consider all the secret places where emptiness dwells in the human heart: in lonely marriages, in singleness, in widowhood; in unemployment or soul-deadening labor or unrealized dreams; in the lives of the poor who do not have what they need and the rich who are choking on excess; in families that are broken and alienated from one another; in the lives of those who are never touched and never hear a kind word spoken to them; in hospitals and nursing homes and forgotten apartments where depression exercises its bitter rule; in the private souls of those who struggle with their sexual identity; in the world of a neglected child or a single parent; in those trapped by the shame of alcoholism, drug addiction or chained to pornography.

This, too, is the empty tomb into which each of us must sooner or later peer and enter. We have to speak our most personal questions into this space and hear them echo back to us. What we understand in the presence of nothingness, along the borders and limitations of our humanity, has a lot to do with what we understand about Easter Sunday morning, when we stand with the disciples in the mouth of nothing and have to determine what we really believe.

Here's the thing: Today it doesn't matter what Mary saw, what Peter thought, what the other disciple understood on Easter morning. It doesn't matter

that they were able to say, with absolute conviction, "We have seen the Lord!" What matters *on this particular Easter Sunday* is the testimony that you and I are able to give. We cannot simply repeat the witness of others. We must testify to what WE have seen and experienced ourselves. This means WE have to go down to the empty places in our lives and seek and find the Risen Lord there.

Because if we don't find Him there, we won't find Him anywhere. And if we haven't encountered Him yet personally, then in all seriousness, sisters and brothers, we should make the search for that encounter the central goal of our lives, starting today. No aspect of our lives is more important than our personal experience of the Risen Lord. We have to walk with Jesus, hear His teaching, feel the healing and embrace of His forgiveness in the darkest aspect of our lives where nothing seems to live.

Get to Confession. Pray at least three times a day. Seek out those people who enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and ask them how they did it. Listen to the stories of older believers about how they came to know Jesus Christ and His Church. Read God's Holy Word and let it touch your heart. Truly believe that when we come up to Holy Communion that we truly received the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ Himself. He is here not only when we remember what He did 2000 years ago, but that He is here NOW!

We'll know Jesus when faith becomes the only sensible response to what we have seen and our hands have touched. When Easter morning lives in us, we can gaze fearlessly into the places in this world that seem to be inhabited by nothing. We will perceive the spirit of God already breathing on that void, and we will be filled with hope. ALLELUIA! And AMEN!