

## LUKE 24:1-12

Have you ever seen a cake that was decorated so beautifully that you didn't want to cut it because you didn't want to spoil the beauty? But you know you're going to cut it because, well, who wants a cake to just look at? You know when you open it up it is going to reveal a wonderful taste treat, so, you delicately cut into it. A piece is on your plate, you pick up your fork and expectantly take a bite. And the taste does not disappoint you.

How about a gift to go with that cake? It is wrapped so beautifully you don't want to unwrap it. The paper is your favorite color, the corners are perfectly folded, the soft ribbon wrapped around it is a lovely match to the wrapping paper, and the bow is hand tied to perfection. You know you need to open it, but you hesitate to do so. When you start to carefully unwrap it you think it feels awfully light... and when you finally get the top of the box off, you understand why it felt so light... the box is empty. What? How could such a beautifully wrapped present be simply an empty box?

It was early morning. The women were walking to the tomb of their leader and friend, Jesus. The sun was just appearing over the horizon. They were wondering how they were going to get the stone away from the front of the tomb since it had been sealed by Pilate's men. They were afraid the body would be stolen, in fact, he had set a guard around the tomb to ensure none of Jesus' followers would attempt to take the body.

As they approached the tomb Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna and the other women looked with disbelief as they saw the stone wasn't covering the cave opening. What? Did they have the wrong place? Why was the stone rolled away? Did someone else come before they were able to get there this early morning? No, they had the right burial cave, they weren't mistaken about its location. So, expecting to go about their business of caring for Jesus' body, they entered the tomb. Suddenly, out of nowhere two dazzling men, no, not the handsome dazzling type, but two men with blinding radiance, appeared out of nowhere.

Terrified, the women threw themselves onto the ground, covering their faces with their arms. The men simply asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Then they went on to say, "He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Well, yes, he did say that didn't he? But we didn't want to believe him, we didn't want to think that Jesus could be taken away from us in such a horrible way. But, yes, now that you've reminded us, he did say that. So the women went back to where the disciples, and the other followers were gathered together, frightened, mourning, wondering what they would do now, and they told them, "The tomb is empty. Remember what Jesus told us, that he would rise from the dead? There were men there, so dazzling bright they hurt our eyes, those men told us that what Jesus had said has come true. He is not in the tomb, he is alive."

But the people gathered there did not believe the women, and they went about doing what it was they were doing. Except Peter. Remember Peter, the one who always questioned, always had impulsive ideas, the one who betrayed Jesus three times before the cock crowed? Yes, Peter. It was Peter who went to the tomb and looked and saw the linen cloths laying there. No tomb robbers would take the time to remove the tomb cloths, so his body wasn't stolen. Peter returned home, amazed.

The gospel writers all write the discovery of the tomb differently, but they all declare the empty tomb. Luke tells us the followers didn't realize what a gift they had been given. If you'll remember the beautifully wrapped empty box, the most beautiful gift ever received, how bewildering it was to find an empty box when the gift was unwrapped. That was the feeling of the disciples. They didn't see the beauty of the wrappings because they were bewildered by the empty contents. But the women at the tomb knew what the dazzling men had told them, that the tomb was empty because Jesus wasn't dead. Yet they still didn't understand the meaning of that beautiful gift. All they knew was that their Jesus was alive.

We know the meaning of the empty tomb. That Jesus conquered death so that we can live, freed from the slavery of sin, in God's presence eternally. Our reading from Isaiah this morning reminds me of a reading from the book of Revelation. God said, "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress."

I am sure that the empty tomb will bring this about. But it hasn't happened yet. Because we are in the in-between time of already and not yet, that time when we know that Jesus has conquered death so that we will live in eternity, but we wait for the time of the new Jerusalem, the time when heaven reigns on earth, the time after the return of Jesus. But what difference does it make to us now?

It can dramatically change the way people live. Because Jesus the Christ lives, we too can live. Because of Jesus the Christ, we can love our enemy; we can pray for those who persecute us; we can turn the other cheek when someone slaps us; we can give when others hurt. It is not the way of the world. To be a Christian is not to be a rational, logical part of this world. To be a Christian means to live in the truth of the resurrection, to live a radical new life because the tomb was empty. Jesus lives and is here now with us. Because of what he did, love can triumph over hate, goodness over evil, truth over lies, hope over despair.

We are new creatures -- people who live believing an amazing story. We are new creatures in our baptism into this Christ of the empty tomb. We are new creatures -- with love to share, with a story of hope to tell, with forgiveness to embrace our neighbor, with hands and hearts that can reach out beyond our own selfish concerns to that person who needs us. We are new creatures living in the truth of the resurrection. Jesus lives! And so can we. We can live radical new lives of faith and love. Jesus lives! And so can we. We can live changed lives filled with hope and joy. Jesus lives! And so can we! He is risen! He is risen, indeed.

All glory be to God! Amen.