

He is not here!

I heard an old, old story, of how a Savior came from glory, how he gave his life on Calvary to save someone like me-

You've heard it too, the old, old story of the empty grave, the good news on which our faith hangs: He is not here, for he has risen as he said. The old, old story of the gospel.

Friends, I cannot hope to tell you this story in a way you have never heard before, even if, as I was writing this, every Easter sermon I have ever heard has fled my memory, for the most part.

It is a great honor and an even greater joy to worship with you today as we celebrate the resurrection. When I was fretting over worship and the message I wanted to share, a friend of mine told me "Just preach the resurrection!" So, children of God, the resurrection story it shall be.

We begin with a tomb.

It's the first day of the week, Sabbath has passed, and it is the third dawn since Jesus was buried. Mourning rituals have been done, friends, family, disciples, and strangers have all started the hard work of grief, made harder by prophecies seemingly unfulfilled, by the inability to do anything, really, about the powers that crucified Jesus in the first place.

We don't see in this story written down where exactly the disciples all are this morning, just that the women are together. We don't see here if they all have gathered in community, or withdrawn into smaller groups, or gone off alone to pray, or to weep.

Feel, for a moment, their reality. It was over. It was finished. Something in their hearts and their hopes was empty, and the tomb was full.

Once or twice a year, perhaps more often sometimes, I go to visit my mother's grave in Cobourg. I bring her flowers and collect all the leaves that fall during season's change and pull them away from the stone, or the dead plant buds. Sometimes I am just there to talk and do whatever that will keep my hands and my mind busy.

In today's gospel reading we aren't told why the women are going to the grave in this story, unlike the other gospels, just that they are. Maybe they, too, wanted to talk to Jesus. Bring flowers, make sure the guards posted to keep people from vandalizing his grave had in fact prevented vandals and had not done any vandalizing themselves.

There is a fog of grief that clouds judgment, dulls senses, and mutes reality. Perhaps the women were within that fog as they walked along to the stone...

At least until the ground shook.

Whatever they had in mind for their morning and their journey, weathering an earthquake likely was not it. Yet the shaking of the ground is something that can be felt, something which anchors what comes next: they see an angel of the lord sitting on top of the stone. It's so frightening that the Roman soldiers just straight up pass out.

The women... Not so much.

They are still afraid, but not to the point of the soldiers. They are afraid, but they listen. Then Mary and Mary Magdalene are the first hearers of the good news of the gospel: "He is not here, he is risen, just as he said."

The angel then invites them to come and see the empty tomb. It isn't just their lives, or the hope of resurrection that is transformative here, but also the empty tomb. How often do we look at an empty thing and see hope? Glass half full is optimism, glass half empty is pessimism, but glass all empty is usually just empty.

The empty tomb- and the empty cross- speak of another reality altogether: one that is resurrected. There is a difference between resurrection and resuscitation or revival. To be resurrected, something or someone has been dead not just for a few minutes or a few hours, but for days. Mourned.

Resurrection marks a complete transcendence of death to life- never to die again. It is not the moment of Christ's death that hope is transformed, but this morning, when flowers grow on the cross, and the tomb is empty. We are saved when we hear "he is not here."

The angel tells the women then to go quickly and talk to the disciples. To share the good news, that the tomb is empty and Christ is risen. He will go ahead of them to Galilee and meet them there.

We'll come back to Galilee.

The women fled from the tomb, having had arguably one of the most terrifying experiences one could imagine, but filled with the joy of renewed life and renewed hope.

Suddenly, Jesus met them.

It is not to the powerful that Jesus appears. Not to the guards, or to Pilate, or to Tiberius Caesar Augustus, to the temple leaders and priests or even to the disciples, but to the women who came to his tomb and would become the first preachers of the gospel.

It is important to note that in the time of Jesus's life, no one would believe the testimony of a woman. In Mark's story, the disciples even doubt them and go to look for themselves, and they- presumably- know who these women are.

Mary and Mary fell down and worshipped, until he told them to carry on with their testimony and share the good news with the disciples. "Do not be afraid," they are told. Of all they have seen, of Jesus himself, of the doubts that will arise when they share the good news- we don't know.

Just that they ran on and shared the story- or we would not have it to tell today. Beautiful are the feet of those who come with good news.

The last phrase of our gospel lesson brings us once again to Galilee. Hear again the words of Christ: "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Go to Galilee. There will we find Jesus.

Jesus is not here- Jesus is in Galilee. We know a little bit about Galilee from the rest of the gospel stories, but in Matthew especially, we learn that Galilee is the place where everyone from all places mix together. There are children of Israel there, yes, but also all nations.

He is not here: for the risen Christ is leading us out into the world.

The tomb is empty, the cross is laden with flowers, and Jesus is not here. God has raised him up, and he has gone on ahead of us. Remember, too, that the disciples are called to meet him there, because just before in this story, they all ran away.

I'm sure you remember the story of Simon Peter and the rooster? Those are the people Jesus calls to follow him into the world. The people who turned back, who despaired, who denied him, who ran away. They are forgiven as Jesus leaves the cross.

In Galilee, there are many people. Many of them don't look, sound, act, think like us. Yet we are called to imagine a new reality, where empty tombs are signs of hope, not of death and despair. And, friends, we will soon depart from this sanctuary, and it too will be empty.

I'd invite you to imagine that as hopeful too, for when our worship here is over, we will- like Mary Magdalene and Mary and Peter and all the disciples and all those who came before us- be following Jesus into the world too. Take joy from the empty tomb, joy in the forgiveness of sins from the empty cross, and joy in this community of believers.

Beloved, let us go from here to find Jesus in Galilee. Christ isn't here- he is out there, sowing hope in the emptiest of places. Let us too live into the joy of Easter. Let us too- yes, all of you- preach the resurrection.

Christ is risen. Alleluia. He is risen indeed.