

SERMON

He is risen! This is the proclamation for the day. This is the celebration that brings us here. This is the truth we know.

A number of comics that appear in the newspaper around Easter time can be expected to touch on themes of Holy Week and Easter. A "Wizard of Id" strip from 2001 was cleverly on target. The squatty little king comes upon a church with a sign out front proclaiming "Good Friday." He says to the priest: "Lemme get this straight ... God comes to earth as one of us ... and we kill him?"

The priest says, "That's right."

The king says, "Your Lord is dead! ... There's a big earthquake, and the curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom!"

"Right again," says the priest.

The king: "What the heck is so good about that?"

Whereupon the priest says, with his hands clasped in front of him and a big smile on his face: "His curtain call."

It is the curtain call we've come here to celebrate today. Think about all the Christian-themed movies and plays. This weekend alone a number will air on TV, and Charlton Heston will part the Red Sea as he does every year, leading the people of Israel out of Egypt. Many films will depict Jesus' short ministry and walk us through the drama of his last week, what we call "Holy Week," from Palm Sunday's entry into Jerusalem until Jesus' body is laid in the tomb.

That is the drama, the main body of the play. The curtain call of his resurrection from the dead is so much more, though we need to be reminded that the New Testament offers no account of the act of the resurrection of Jesus. We have, instead, reports only of the empty tomb, and in the weeks to come, the weeks of Easter season, we will hear the stories of encounters with the risen Christ. But we have no stories, no account, no evidence, if you will, of the actual resurrection event.

What we have is an empty tomb.

Joseph of Arimathea claimed Jesus' lifeless body and laid it in his own tomb, the one he had reserved for himself. The women saw this done, and then in keeping with Jewish law, left for the duration of the Sabbath, for the law prohibited any work on the Sabbath day.

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And this is where today's story begins.

The Sabbath has ended. It is the first day of the week, at first light. And the women come to the tomb with the spices they have prepared for the body. The great stone that had covered the mouth of the tomb has been rolled away, and when the women go inside, they find that the body is not there! Two men in dazzling array – heavenly messengers – ask, “Why do you seek him? He is not here! He is risen!”

The women ran to tell Jesus' disciples and all the others. And that's where today's gospel reading ends, though it's not the end of the story, and not even the end of this part of the story. Because when the women told their news to the apostles, what they had seen and learned inside that tomb, that empty tomb, the men didn't believe them! “These words seemed to them an idle tale,” says one version.

There is a difference between standing in the tomb, as the women had done, and standing outside. The view is different. The perspective is different. One sees different things. One sees things differently.

The women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James – are named as being among the company that early morning. They had followed Jesus from his trial before Pilate to his crucifixion on Calvary. They had stayed with him at the cross and they were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Jesus had said to his followers that they must pick up their crosses to follow him, and certainly these women had endured the cross while the men ran away and Peter denied even knowing Jesus. The women stayed at the cross, and later entered the tomb to follow him. Their view – their perspective – was an Easter faith. They had walked the path to Calvary and so had eyes to see the heavenly messengers where they expected to see their Lord, and ears to hear them ask, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen!”

And they believed.

The men were frightened. They ran away from the cross; Peter denied knowing Jesus. When the women came to tell them the news that Jesus had risen from the dead, the men didn't believe them! And when Peter – ever-impulsive Peter – got up and ran to the tomb to see for himself, did he go inside? No. According to the story we have received, he stayed outside, stooping to look in.

Much fun might be had with the gender differences in this story, and how later faith traditions developed understandings along gender lines that so disparaged the first to believe and exalted the authority of those who did not. This is a ripe field for exploration. But while there may be a point the gospel writers wished to make about such matters, that is not the point of this homily.

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The point for today is: There is a big difference between standing inside the tomb in the place of the resurrected Lord, and standing outside the tomb, stooping to look in. One is the place of an Easter faith, a conviction of things known, though not seen.

The other place is stuck in the events of Good Friday, and can believe the horror, the fear, the death, but hasn't quite made it to those things even more difficult to believe: the loving goodness of God, generosity, kindness, forgiveness, hope.

The difference between standing inside the tomb and standing outside looking in is the difference not of men and women, but of Easter resurrection triumphant over Good Friday death.

It is the triumph of a courage to believe over a skepticism that isn't quite sure. It is the triumph of celebration and wondrous news over disappointment and despair.

It is the faith of Easter, which knows the agony of Good Friday, and knows that is not the end of the drama. There will be a curtain call.

When we stand in the place where Peter stood, stooping low to look into the tomb with our own doubt and our disbelief intact, what will we see? We will see a dark cavern, shadows and dust, an empty tomb.

But when we seek our Lord in that tomb and we stand with him in the darkness, what then will we see? Those same heavenly messengers in dazzling array? Probably not. But we will see the emptiness. And we will know its reason. It is an emptiness not of doubt, despair, disbelief, but an emptiness that signals something new, renewed, a triumph over the impossible, a hope and promise greater than our imagining. And when we look past the darkness of the tomb to the world outside, we will see light – dazzling light, blinding light, a shimmering curtain of light. The curtain call of Easter.

The light of Christ.

He is risen!

Alleluia!