

Luke 24:1-12

Easter Vigil

April 19, 2025

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“Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.” Told this - told what? What information or insight did they have to tell the others? Unlike the stories still to come, they didn't see Jesus. Did you notice that? We're gathered on this dark night to tell the story of resurrection, and Jesus doesn't actually show up yet? It's like he's running late for his own party.

What Mary Magdalene, Joanna, another Mary, and still other women discover is an empty tomb. They find emptiness. And what's amazing is that this emptiness is a new kind of emptiness. It is not the yawning pit of absence, surely the pit they've barely emerged from to do this mournful work. What they find is space, a space that is not occupied by the resurrected Jesus; this empty tomb offers a new kind of emptiness. It's possibility. It's *what if*.

If you ask me what my favorite resurrection story is, I'll likely tell you whichever one I just heard because I love them all. I love the story of the two friends on the road to Emmaus, the story that comes on the heels of this one; it's beautiful: a walk, a dinner, a revelation. And I love Mary Magdalene in John's version, mistaking Jesus for a gardener. And the one where Jesus makes breakfast. But tonight, I love this one. I love this abbreviated story because in the empty space of the tomb, I find room for myself, and maybe you find some room too. You see, I haven't had dinner with Jesus. I didn't get to examine and probe his wounded side. I've never been in a room where Jesus came through a locked door. So, I love this story where the women don't see him for themselves, and yet they are changed. They are changed simply and miraculously by an open door, by the news that he is not here, that he is risen. They are changed by an empty space.

One of our Lenten preachers talked about the after-effects of God. The idea is that God moved through the world once upon a time and left the equivalent of divots in the landscape, marking the path traveled. And we can see the places where God was, where God went by in the hollowed-out tracks. My quibble with that preacher is that I don't think these traces are all in the past; I believe they continue. But for tonight, past, present, and future blur anyway. The women come to the tomb, find the stone rolled away, and do not find the body. They find a perplexing place where they expected to find a broken body. They find a hole, a place carved out and left empty, a divot. They find the footsteps marking the way that Jesus went. And they are rightly terrified by the dazzling news that this momentary absence means more than they can grasp. Terrified because it is scary to realize that all the ideas you had, all the words you had, all the plans you had are now far too small to fill the world that is opening up around you.

This emptied-out grave becomes the capacious place where a whole new world begins to take shape. The women have enough room here in this space and in this moment to bring their fears and confusion to meet this bewildering news, and to recall and to remember all that he had told them. They have enough room to start to believe in something beautiful and strange. No one has seen Jesus yet, but still they understand that everything is different. In the space where they thought they would find his body, they find instead possibility. They find *what if*. What if all the confounding stories he told us are true? What if God is even more imaginative, more loving, more uncontainable than we could conceive of in the small measure of our minds?

What if God created the heavens and the earth? What if God could part a sea in front of us? What if our hearts of stone could become hearts of flesh? What if these bones could live? What if death is not the end of the story? What if the tomb is empty?

At this present moment, nothing makes sense yet. And in this present moment, everything becomes possible. No one has met him yet, no one has tried to touch him, no one has heard him. And I feel a kinship with the women in this kind of moment, in which the story is still unfurling. And I am grateful and profoundly moved by their witness, their belief, with only the barest bit of news to go on. They found the marker of where Jesus had been, and they grasped in the emptiness, in the still unfolding present moment, that suddenly everything is possible. They found the empty tomb to be full of a new kind of spaciousness, an expansive and expanding hope. And they returned from the tomb and told this to the apostles. The tomb is empty; he is not here; he is risen. It's an invitation and an encouragement for us in those moments when nothing makes sense to believe in possibilities undreamt of. We remember tonight that emptiness can hold so much promise. We discover the space to believe in resurrection.