



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for The Easter Vigil
St. Mark's on the Campus
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TOMBS are spaces of death. We don't tend to think so much in terms of tombs today, at least not in our culture. There might be places in the world where people think in terms of tombs, but here we think primarily in terms of graves or a columbarium where cremains are placed. Whatever we call them, the existence of these spaces is partly simply a practical matter. We can't keep dead bodies lying around the living room indefinitely; it's not hygienic.

Another part of us wants to do something out of reverence for the person whose body it once was, the person we knew and loved in that *particular* body. We want to treat that treasure with due care, even with love. And by providing these resting spaces, we also have somewhere concrete to go to in order to feel close to the person whose body it was.

I grew up in a family that took flowers to graves on Memorial Days, and I remember once travelling a couple of hours away to my father's hometown. It was important as part of that pilgrimage to take flowers to his parents' graves. Although I never knew my grandparents, I somehow found myself connected to them as my Dad re-connected, re-established relationship in that visit.

If we don't bury an actual body, we often make other arrangements for a location that serves the same purpose. My brother's ashes were scattered in Yosemite National Park, one of his favorite spots. But his family arranged for a remembrance plaque at the church which led his memorial service. That way, family members have a place to go, a space which they can use as a focus for their prayers to God and for their continuing relationship with my brother.

I know that for my mother, moving away first from her parents' graves in Ohio and then later from my father's grave in Indiana brought challenges for that very reason. The continuing relationship needed to be found in some new place, a place without the physical body but with other kinds of sensual connections she carried with her.

Tombs, graves, a columbarium – they are spaces of death. For Christians, they are also spaces of life, of continuing relationship beyond the grave. In Mark and Luke's accounts of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene and some of the other women who follow Jesus go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices. In Matthew's account, we simply know that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to the tomb, perhaps to anoint the

body, maybe to pray, maybe to mourn Jesus and his awful death, maybe simply to sit and remember in that special place, near the body of Jesus. Maybe they want to do *whatever* they can do, even though it doesn't feel like enough. Those of us who have mourned someone we love know the feeling that can follow death. We want to *do* something for the person we love; and whatever we *can* do often feels as if it's not quite enough. We become acutely aware of how "enough" depends not on *us* – *enough* depends on God. That time following death can be one of the most disorienting we encounter – as it *re-orient*s us to God.

But our gospel tonight reminds us that *resurrection* can be equally disorienting! The guards at the stone ironically become like dead men when the angel appears because they're so afraid. After all, what do they do when faced with an angel? This situation isn't in the employee handbook! The angel's first words to the women are "Don't be afraid!" Nonetheless, they go running from the tomb with *fear* as well as great joy! And then Jesus, after he initially greets the women with "Rejoice!", says once again to them, "Don't be afraid!"

Why would the resurrection be so disorienting? Well on one level it's simply not what any of them were expecting. They all expected a dead body to stay put – most of us would be a bit shaken by what they're going through. But let me also suggest another level of disorientation. At some point these women are going to have to grapple with what this experience means to them, as we all must grapple with our experience. Are they going to trust in this resurrection reality -- or not?

When we really trust in the resurrection, it changes the way we live THIS side of the grave. We see ourselves and each other not as passing realities but as participating in eternity. We begin to understand that God has provided the "enough" that all of us need. Faith in that resurrection truth enabled Jesus to go to the cross, and when we adopt that faith it enables each of us to pick up our cross, too, and follow him. Scripture is very clear that Jesus does not raise himself from death. The resurrection depends on God – the power of God on which Jesus depends for life – both on this side of the grave, and on the other.

Some of you will remember that wonderful reading from Ezekiel we had a few Sundays ago. "Prophecy to these bones," says the Lord God. "Say to them: O dry bones . . . : I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and I will cause flesh to come upon you, and I will cover you with skin, and I will put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." Ezekiel is speaking on God's behalf to Israel, which thinks its bones are all dried up and its hope is completely lost. God says NO! Your hope is NOT lost! I am your God and so you *always* have hope! That is my promise to you, the promise I made to your ancestors, the promise I fulfilled at the Red Sea. The promise that is grounded in my giving you life in the first place. You *always* have hope.

Likewise, throughout the New Testament Jesus is talked about as having been raised by the power of God. When all seemed lost, God came through. Not as the disciples expected, and they had to walk through hell with Jesus first, but in the end God triumphed – as God always will.

So where do we go in the midst of life to sustain that continuing relationship with God in Jesus? What's the location where *we*, like the two Marys in our gospel for this evening, can go to feel close to Jesus and connect with him at all times, even when death seems victorious? Where can we go to be reconnected to the deepest truth of

all – not only that we depend on God – but that we *can* depend on God? Well, it's the church of course. Not the building, whether gothic or neo-gothic or radically contemporary. After Jesus is raised from the dead, he doesn't direct his followers to a building; he draws them to each other. To the church as the community. The Body of Christ. The Body into which Katherine has been grafted this night by God's loving grace. The Body in which she will draw close to Jesus; where she will become part of Him and he will become part of her. Where she will participate in resurrection life and ministry. Where she will receive gifts of grace, and give them, and receive more in the very giving itself because the nature of grace is to reproduce itself.

At our best, the members of the church embody the spirit of Jesus to each other and to the world around us. We're not always at our best, of course; the forces of sin and death haven't disappeared. We continue to be reminded of just how much we depend on God. And we continue to hear: Don't be afraid. Trust in the resurrection power of God. Live and die as if you do.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia! Amen.