



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for Easter Morning
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 in 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 places, 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 with them 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. His family arranged for a remembrance plaque at the church which did 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.

And 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, in some new way, a place without the physical body but with other kinds of connections she carried with her.

Yes, tombs 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 John's account, we simply know that Mary Magdalene came 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.

Maybe she wants to do *whatever* she can do, even though it doesn't feel like enough. Those of us who have mourned someone we love know that feeling that can follow death. We want to *do* something for the person we love; and whatever we *can* do feels like somehow it's not quite enough. We become acutely aware of how "enough" depends not on *us* – *enough* depends on God.

We're not surprised that Mary is completely thrown when she discovers that Jesus' body is missing from the tomb. We can imagine what that must have been like for her. She automatically assumes the most obvious explanation. As my mother used to say when I had lost something growing up, "Well it didn't just get up and walk away!" Mary assumes that *Jesus* did not just "get up and walk away." And of course, even though in one sense she's quite mistaken, in another sense she's quite right. Scripture is very clear that Jesus does not raise *himself*. The resurrection depends on the power of God – the power of God on which Jesus depends for life – 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: "Prophesy 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! You're 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. 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? To sustain our hope? What's the location where we, like Mary, can go to feel close to Him and connect with him at all times, even when death seems victorious? Where can we go to reconnect 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. No, after Jesus is raised, he doesn't tell his followers to go to a building. He draws them to each other, to the church as the community. The Body of Christ. The Body into which we are grafted in baptism by God's loving grace. The Body in which we draw close to Jesus; where we become a part of Him and He a part of us. Where we participate in resurrection life and ministry. Where we receive gifts of grace, and give them, and receive more gifts 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. Even in the church we continue to be reminded of just how much we depend on God. And we continue to hear the promise of God: you CAN always depend on me. Hold on to your hope in Christ Jesus.

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