

“Bearing The Shadow of Christ”

Jeremiah 31:1-6

John 20:1-18

Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed. A new way of living is available to you because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Three individuals are at the pearly gates of heaven. St. Peter tells them that they can enter the gates if they can answer one question. St. Peter asks the first, “What is Easter?” He replies, “Oh, that’s easy! It’s the holiday in November when everyone gets together, eats turkey, and is thankful...” “Wrong!” replies St. Peter, and proceeds to ask the second the same question, “What is Easter?” The second replies, “Easter is the holiday in December when we put up a nice tree, exchange presents, and celebrate the birth of Jesus.” St. Peter looks at the second, shakes his head in dismay, tells her she’s wrong, and then peers over his glasses at the third and asks, “What is Easter?” The third smiles confidently and looks St. Peter in the eyes, “I know what Easter is.” “Oh?” says St. Peter. “Easter is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and his disciples were eating at the last supper and Jesus was later betrayed and turned over to the Romans by one of his disciples. The Romans took him to be crucified and he was stabbed in the side, made to wear a crown of thorns, and was hung on a cross with nails through his hands. He was buried in a nearby cave which was sealed off by a large boulder.” St. Peter smiles broadly with delight. Then he continues, “Every year the boulder is moved aside so that Jesus can come out...and, if he sees his shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter.”¹

Yes, a good laugh, but many have a skewed view of the importance of this day. Beginning Palm Sunday, and continuing through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and yes, today, Christians proclaim that God has delivered humanity from the emptiness of death to the fullness of life.

As anxiety increases around the emptiness we can often feel and experience, the religious have a significant contribution to make. Often, the emptiness we feel, and experience can be driven by our disconnectedness from others, particularly from those who aren’t like us. In this regard, Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and the emerita Butman Professor of Religion at Piedmont College, writes, “The faces on the news are real and important. I want never to forget how much other people in other parts of the world are suffering from groupishness in all its

¹Found on a humor internet site that no longer exists.

deadly forms.”² Might your feelings and experiences of emptiness be caused by your isolation from others who may not share your particular perspective on the circumstances you’re facing?

The texts in Jeremiah 31:1-6 and John 20:1-20 reveal that to embrace the feelings and experiences of emptiness that one may have is the first step to receive the deliverance promised by the empty tomb.

In Jeremiah 31:1-6, we learn that God is faithful even when we have feelings and experiences emptiness. God was faithful to and present with the people of Israel in their wilderness wandering and ongoing wilderness experiences. Jeremiah 31:4 reads, “Again I will build you, and you shall be built...Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.” And God is faithful to and present with us when we have feelings and experiences of emptiness in our lives. God has labored from the first day of creation to bring redemption to all creation through Israel. This work finds its culmination in Good Friday and Easter Sunday.³

In John 20:1-18, we learn that death loses. When Mary went to the tomb that early morning, the stone had been rolled away. The tomb was empty. The linen cloths were all that remained. Jesus’ body was gone. The emptiness Mary felt and experienced quickly vanquished when Jesus calls her by name. The presence of the risen Christ speaks to her memory and intimacy with Jesus prior to his crucifixion. Love replaces Mary’s empty feeling and experience of Jesus’ death.⁴

The tomb is still empty. Love can replace the empty feeling and experience of death in your life. Through authentic self-reflection, you can embrace God’s promise based on the empty tomb to deliver you from the feelings and experiences of emptiness. When you hunker down and

²Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2019), 137.

³Adapted from N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York City, New York: HarperOne, 2008).

⁴In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of James C. Howell, John C. Holbert, Thomas G. Long and Jonathan L. Walton as found in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 182-184, 184-186, 195-197 and 197-199.

only listen to the voices that share the same narrative, you're missing out on another's perspective that may be the voice of God calling your name. Because others reminded Barbara Brown Taylor the significance of those other voices, the author of *Holy Envy* writes, "...the neighbors God has given me to love do not all call God by the same name."⁵ Other voices assist us in overcoming our feelings and experiences of emptiness.

Remember, God has labored from the first day of creation to bring redemption to all creation. And that labor continues today. The empty feeling and experience of death brought on by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is being replaced by love. God has a warm relationship with you. God loves you and wants you to love others with that same empathetic, listening, caring, loving and compassionate warmth.

Other voices can assist you being delivered from your feelings and experiences of emptiness. God has delivered humanity from the emptiness of death to the fullness of life. The shadow of Jesus covers you. You can have resurrection life. Amen.

This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Easter Sunday, 12 April 2020 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh in his Study at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California

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⁵Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*, 137.