

## Easter 2019 "The Unexpected Response"

There are many ways in our daily lives in which we encounter things that are empty. One of the most frustrating ways to start your day is to reach in the refrigerator for the orange juice container and find that it is basically empty. Many of us also look with disbelief at the fuel gauge in our cars when it alerts us that we are almost out of gas. How could the tank be empty?

And certainly, there are more serious ways that we encounter emptiness in life. Have you ever finished a conversation with someone and come away with an empty feeling? We experience emptiness in relationships often as loneliness and frustration. When we are expecting to hear good news and instead receive disappointing, the whole of our insides rushes with emptiness. Perhaps though, the death of someone we love is the emptiest of all—there is a hollowness, a void, that we know will never be filled again in the same way. Here we know what it is to question and ache in the depths of our humanity. Empty is always the unexpected event.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb." (John 20:1) Empty. Mary Magdalene was going to the tomb to prepare the body of Jesus properly for burial. And what we must fully understand is that Mary, as well as all of the disciples fully expected that Jesus' dead body would be in the tomb. And would not all of us have had that same expectation? At that time the Jews believed that resurrection would be for all of God's people, when God would establish his kingdom of peace and justice for Israel. If you were a first-century Jew, you would never have in your wildest imagination believed that resurrection would be for one young Jewish man in the middle of history. Yet, the empty tomb is the unexpected event encountered first by Mary, then Peter and the other disciples. Can you feel what their fear, anxiety, and confusion must have been?

Alcoholics Anonymous claims: "The task ahead of us is never as great as the power behind us." The story did not end on Good Friday, with the passion and crucifixion of Christ as was the Romans and Jewish leaders' intent, because the disciples were quite clear that Jesus was the Messiah—the anointed one of God to usher in the kingdom of God with justice, peace, compassion, and love. The followers of Jesus understood through the event of the empty tomb, Jesus' appearance to Mary in the garden outside of the tomb, and his subsequent appearances on the road to Emmaus and in Jerusalem, that on the third day Jesus was raised to life again.

So today, Easter 2019, the empty tomb compels us as Christians once again to the unexpected response. I think that God tired out long ago of a Christian faith and Church that always thinks, speaks, and acts in expected ways. If through Christ's resurrection we have been given forgiveness and the gift of eternal life, isn't that what we are to be about proclaiming and acting upon? Today, we live in a time that through the television media and social media is often quite mean-spirited and vitriolic; the Church must be the place where all judgement is left to God and all find acceptance. Systems often reject and discriminate; the unexpected response of the Church is to welcome all people to the altar of Jesus' love, compassion, justice and peace.

The empty tomb of Jesus was an unexpected response by God to his Son's crucifixion. Can this Easter be a call to all of God's people to the unexpected response of acceptance not discrimination; the unexpected response of love, listening, and understanding rather than the all too common vitriol? You see, the paradox of the empty tomb is that it does not leave us with emptiness. On the contrary, it leaves us with the hope of God through Jesus Christ on Easter—that, love, acceptance, compassion, and justice are possible, and even worth dying for.

What do you hope for this Easter for you, your loved ones, our nation and the world? This is a very big question worth contemplating. Is it a renewal of faith in Jesus Christ? Is it a recommitment to Christ and the faith of the Apostles? Is it the response of Mary Magdalene to the resurrected Jesus outside of the tomb, "Teacher?" Maybe it is truly coming to and accepting Jesus for the first time? Is it bringing your child to Jesus Christ? Or, acting more Christ-like in your daily life...asking yourself, "What would Jesus do?" Finally, maybe it is today giving over to Jesus at the altar, where all are welcome, that heavy burden that you have been carrying in your heart?

My prayer for us all is that we may have an unexpected response to the empty tomb, and that the resurrected Lord Jesus fills your life with his love, joy and peace. A Blessed Easter to you all.