

How often do we take for granted what is most important in our lives?

We assume drinking water will be clean. That our spouse knows that I love her/him. That everyone knows the Easter story. But like leftovers reheated for third time, sometimes we get to Easter morning and because we have been here before, simply go through the motions.

In doing so we risk missing a most important moment that may never come our way again.

As you reflect upon the Easter Gospel, reflect upon what Mary almost missed.

She was visiting the tomb of a loved one, as she had done many times before. . . Because she “knew” what to expect the empty tomb didn’t register because it wasn’t part of “the cemetery tour” she knew so well.

When she encountered what she didn’t expect she assumed the worst (rather than the best.) Words and tears came out together, “I can’t find him!” And even when face to face with the risen Jesus himself, she had to admit “I can’t see You!” *What a metaphor for all of the confusion and fear of the world!*

Several years ago, we missed celebrating Easter in our sanctuary because of the COVID shutdown. But that is not the first time we have “missed” Easter! Too often, like Mary, we approach this morning knowing what to expect -- Easter baskets with died eggs, a family meal, and maybe even some new clothes. And because we have been here before, we risk missing the miracle of this day.

Just as an empty tomb just didn't register for Mary, sometimes we miss the obvious as well!
How could a tomb be empty?

We have faith it was, but because we can't explain it is confusing. No one wants to face death. (And in a world with increasing numbers of non-believers, we might even be embarrassed to admit we DO believe in the resurrection. But how sweet it is that this Gospel is OUR story, and that Mary approached this morning no differently than us ... with fear, confusion, and distraction.

John’s Gospel has an overriding theme of GLORY, yet Jesus’ closest friends were so overwhelmed by grief that they literally were “in the dark.” and didn’t have a clue. They came to the First Easter experiencing what everyone feels at the death of a loved one: sadness, loss, grief, fear, trembling, and emptiness.

John couldn’t even bear to look! Mary’s eyes were blinded by tears. Finally, the guys looked and saw the body was gone! The text says, “they believed.” But what did they believe for John says they didn’t understand yet? So, they ran home. They still hadn’t seen Jesus. All they knew was that something had changed.

But that was a good start – this morning would not be taken for granted. Now, they had to pay attention.

Christmas is easy. A little baby laughing in a manger. Today is tough – a graveyard story! That is why the world loves Christmas but ignores Easter. We want to pretend death doesn’t exist for it is our greatest fear. But the angels’ song at Christmas was really the first Easter hymn – Jesus became a child so that he could live to escape a tomb. And the angels haven’t stopped singing since.

Who would expect good news in a cemetery? And yet if a cemetery can become a place of hope and life can you imagine what gifts every other part of our living can be? No longer is the grave a place of dark emptiness but the beginning of God's "welcome home!"

In similar fashion, the cross is not a place of embarrassment or defeat, but a powerful announcement of God's love for all!

Mary was left alone, just like we are, after the funeral. Just as her eyes were clouded by tears and preconceived assumptions, we often stumble into Easter morning preoccupied with traditions and distractions of life in Kalamazoo. But Mary's story is ours, and our story continues as we follow her close encounters with the miracle of Easter.

A day comes for each, after death, when it is quiet again – and everyone has left – and we are all alone. Or are we? The risen Jesus had been there all along (what else could the empty tomb mean?) And that Jesus stands next to you as well!

And that is the simple truth and good news of today. Because you have chosen to come and gather with Mary and Peter and John at the empty tomb – you too have seen what they saw – death has no power. He is risen. He is risen indeed.

I will never forget Easter of 2007, when Walt Wangerin Jr., a professor at Valparaiso, preached the Easter services in the chapel of the Resurrection. That Christmas he had been diagnosed with metastatic cancer, and four months later he delivered the Good News of Easter.

Even though weakened by the bombardment of chemotherapy and radiation in an attempt to save his earthly life, he climbed into that pulpit full of peace. Even as he faced his own tomb, certainly with tears in his eyes, he confidently faced the empty tomb that changed Mary's life and ours! His miraculous recovery began on Easter, and he continued to teach and write for years after. And when his earthly death eventually came, he had already been celebrating Easter for his entire life.

You see, we always knew the story, but *when it becomes our story, how could any part of our lives ever be seen in the same way again?*

That is why this day, and this empty tomb must never be taken for granted. The darkness is lifted. The night is over. The grave is empty. Because Jesus lives, we shall live also. And all can face death in a brand-new way.

Jesus alone can change death – and in doing so changes life. Mary began her day expecting the expected. Jesus gave her a surprise instead, as he does for us. We don't have to sugar coat death ever again, or fear it, or hide from it.

Through tear-stained eyes she finally saw a new truth. Jesus was alive! And because He lives, we shall live also. And neither life nor death, nor anything else in all creation can ever separate us from the love of God!

What a strange place – in a cemetery -- to celebrate hope, and faith, and to celebrate God's love. There is nothing wrong with the special traditions we associate with this day, but don't ever take for granted the real power of this day! But never forget; the tomb is empty! And now our living can finish the songfest that the angels of Bethlehem began!