

April 12, 2009
Easter Day
Mark 16:1-8
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RUNNING ON EMPTY

I thought it would be an antique by now. The toy I used to play with called “etch a sketch.” But a friend of mine said they still make them and are available at Toys R Us. Maybe some of you parents know that. Maybe everyone knows what I’m talking about: that red square or rectangle with a blank, empty screen and knobs that let you draw things. If you make a mistake or don’t like what you draw you can just shake it and start again. It was also originally called a “magic screen.” But a writer on classic toys said he would have named it “dump a drawing.”

Don’t you wish that life could be that simple? That you could just shake your screen, empty its contents, delete the problems and emotional baggage, get a clean slate, and start over?

Visualize *empty* for a moment. We’re not too comfortable with being empty or feeling empty. For most of us, empty is not a good word, not a word we’d want to use to describe how we’re feeling.

But empty is probably what the women are feeling as they go to the tomb early on that Sunday morning. Their emotions raw. Their hopes dashed. Their energy spent. They are grieving and going to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body with spices.

Mark’s version of the Easter story is our earliest. And it’s sparse on details. All that the women see is that the tomb is empty. That the dead Jesus is no longer there. A white-robed youngster gives the facts: “He’s not here. Look at the place where he was--it’s empty. He has been raised.”

And the way Mark tells it, the women simply run from the empty tomb. They flee on foot. Why? They are afraid. It’s a very strange way to end the story. So strange that other, later gospel writers add other details and interpretation. Mark’s version, was simply too stark. Too empty.

It reminds me of a poem by Mary Oliver called “The Uses of Sorrow.” She writes:

*(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)
Someone I loved once gave me
a box of darkness.
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.*

Whether we call it a box of darkness or an empty place, it is simply a big void, something that all of us face at one time or another:

- When you give your heart to someone who doesn’t feel the same way about you.
- When you invest time and money in a profession and later figure out that it’s not what you really want to do
- When you lose your job in downsizing.
- When you find that your savings for retirement have evaporated.
- When you put money into a home, only to see your equity disappear.
- When you lose a spouse, from divorce or death, and find yourself alone in the world.

We all carry around a lot of baggage: the losses, disappointments, frustrations and sorrows that take up space within us. “Baggage” is the word that one of the adults baptized at Holy Trinity last night used to describe the human condition as we were discussing the spirituality of dying and rising with Christ. Sometimes you wish you just could get rid of the baggage—to shake the etch-a-sketch and start over.

Much of the time we’re running on empty. Running on fumes, as I like to say. Trying to deal with the stresses in our lives even as we take in the problems of the world. Most of us have a hard time stopping, standing still and breathing. In the seventies Jackson Browne sang a song, “Running on Empty.” In the song he’s trying to leave the past behind, but he’s running on empty. There is nothing, nowhere to go.

Or as the lyrics put it: “Everyone I know, everywhere I go/People need some reason to believe/I look around for the friends that I used to turn to to pull me through/Looking into their eyes I see them running too/Running on—running on empty.”

Having come through Lent and Holy Week we have learned again the profound truth: you’ve got to pass through some empty tombs and empty places on the way to resurrection. On Friday night our worship space was bare. Empty. Void. We needed to be in that empty place to know what this morning means. To take in the abundance and the feasting.

The human heart is like an infinite abyss. So wrote mathematician, philosopher and physicist Blaise Pascal about 350 years ago. In vain we try to fill our hearts with all kinds of things. But only God can fill that void, he wrote.

Mark’s account of Easter ends abruptly. It isn’t finished. The story continues with us.

Most of us spend way too much time looking at electronic screens—television screens, cell phone screens, computer screens. But for a minute, push “off.” Shake the screen. Unplug the cord. Could it that *empty* is actually a gift?

Mary Bateson wrote a book called “Composing a Life.” Using the stories of five women and the interruptions and challenges that were part of their situations, she describes how they improvised their lives in a fluid movement of adaptation.

For writers it is an empty screen or a piece of paper waiting for words and image. For musicians it is a blank piece of staff paper awaiting notes and rests. For artists it is an empty canvas waiting to be filled with color. For all of us it is a new day and everything that means. The rest of the story is yet to be written.

I suppose a blank “etch-a-sketch” screen would be one way to say it. A more ancient phrase is “tabula rasa,” a blank slate. We are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. Every day we die to sin and rise to new life. Every new day we are given a tabula rasa. The baggage is deleted.

The tomb is empty. Christ is risen. Death no longer has dominion over us.

And before us is the greatest gift we could ever hope for: another chance. Another day. Another opportunity. Another beginning.

The risen Christ comes among us this morning. Filling our empty spaces. Soothing our empty hearts. Energizing us with creativity and passion to fill our empty world with art and music, with justice and compassion, with love and kindness. Christ comes not only to our hearts, but to our bodies: bread and wine, food and drink, the body and blood of Christ, to nourish, to feed, to fill.

Like the women at the tomb, in a sense, we run from this place. Or dance. Or walk a bit lighter. Whether on foot, with a cane or a wheelchair. We run back to our everyday lives, ready to face whatever comes our way. We run to the world to share the good news that Christ is risen.

Empty never looked so good.