

Wesley United Methodist Church

April 16, 2017

Empty Crib, Empty Cross, Empty Cave.

Matthew 28:1-10

True story. A United Methodist pastor was asked to conduct a graveside service for a member of his church. The only problem was, the cemetery was more than an hour away from the church. The pastor wasn't feeling well so he decided to ride with the Funeral Director in the coach. By the time they arrived at the cemetery, the flu had invaded completely and he said he felt like the Chinese Army was having a Pogo Stick Derby on his head and stomach. Feverish and sick, he made it through the service, but he was starting to look like most flu victims, like death warmed over.

As they headed back home, the funeral director suggested the pastor stretch out in the back of the coach. It had curtains and nobody would see him.

The pastor thought it was a good idea and promptly fell asleep.

He awoke when the vehicle stopped. Taking a few minutes to fully awaken, he slowly sat up and drew aside the curtain to see where he was. He was face to face with a gas station attendant, who was surprised and shocked to see a body in the back of the hearse staring back at him. With all the color drained out of him and his eyes as wide as saucers, the gas pump flew into the air and the attendant ran on shaky legs back into the gas station only to collapse while the funeral director tried to explain the whole situation.

I'm pretty sure that's how the women who came to the empty tomb that first Easter morning must have felt. They had to have run on shaky legs back to the disciples, their hearts pounding with both shock and excitement. Let's look at the Resurrection story from Matthew 28:1-10.

It wasn't a funeral director who shared the Good News with the women, it was an angel. And not just any angel, but the Angel of the Lord. But, it still startled them almost as much as that preacher waking up in the funeral coach startled that gas station attendant.

The news on that first Easter was startling. Nothing like it had ever happened before and yet its significance has changed the world. This empty cave coupled with the empty crib and the empty cross have changed how we look at life and how we look at the world.

Some of you may be thinking, I know why the empty cross is remembered at Easter, what does the empty crib have to do with Easter? Well, it all began in the crib and we can never separate the cross from the crib. Because without the crib there would have been no cross. It began in the crib, but was perfected on the cross and made a reality through the empty cave. Martin Luther said, "Christ became what he was not—Sin." In order that we might become what we were not—"the Righteousness of God."

What we need to remember is that Jesus didn't die on the cross for the perfect. Jesus didn't die for the godly. Jesus didn't die for the good. If so, none of us would have had a chance. Jesus died for the imperfect, ungodly, sinners like us. The crib, the cross, and the cave are empty which means there is hope for all of us.

I want you to do me a favor. If everybody does it, then no one will look foolish.

I want you to take your hand and reach out and grab the secret of this day.

Go ahead, just reach out and grab the secret of this day. Once you got it firmly in your grasp, I want you to open your hand. What do you see? Nothing, right?

Your hand is empty, right? That's the secret of this day. The crib, the cross, the cave are all empty. And that's what makes this day, above all days, so special.

The crib is empty because in Jesus hope was born into the world.

But in order for that hope to reach the entire world, the baby Jesus of Christmas had to grow up to become a man. And he did. He became a man who challenged the world with faith and hope. He grew to become a man who owned nothing and lived on borrowed time.

He was born in a borrowed stable and laid in a borrowed manger for a crib.

He preached from a borrowed boat. He rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He fed 5,000 from the lunch he borrowed from a small boy.

He borrowed an Upper Room for the Last Supper with the disciples.

He was laid in a tomb that was borrowed from Joseph of Arimathea.

Everything of significance in his life and ministry was borrowed. Except one thing. The cross was his and his alone.

Jesus willingly took up the cross of our redemption. He willingly and knowingly bore the weight of our sin and disobedience at Calvary so we would no longer have to bear it ourselves. Jesus carried his cross out of his deep,

unconditional love for us. That cross, that instrument of suffering and death became our symbol of forgiveness and

redemption. The cross is empty because Jesus was the final sacrifice, the final Paschal Lamb. This act the empty cross echo Jesus' last words, "It is finished."

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took Jesus' body down from the cross and lovingly laid it in the tomb moments before the Sabbath began.

And on the third day, the women went to the tomb to make those funeral preparations for Jesus' body which they hadn't had time to perform on Friday evening.

But to their surprise, the stone had been rolled aside and the tomb was empty. The stone was rolled away, not so Jesus could get out, but so that we could get in and see that the tomb is empty. The tomb is empty because nothing can hold the Son of God, not even death. The tomb is empty to remind us that the fear of death is an empty fear. The tomb is empty because Jesus conquered death and offers us resurrection and eternal life with him. That's what the crib, the cross and the cave have in common. They are empty so that the promises of the Savior would be fulfilled and fill us with faith, and hope, and new life.

There is an old folk legend that says, scattered throughout the earth, there are twenty-eight people on whom the future of the world depends.

These twenty-eight people don't know who they are. You could be one of them. But their actions will determine whether the world will continue or not.

What if that were true. What if you were one of the 28? What if the future of the world depends on your actions? Luckily, the future of the world is firmly in God's hands and the only one it ever depended on was Jesus. But the future of the mission of God's kingdom depends on us. Jesus came into this world to seek and save that which was lost. Then he returned to God. But before he did, Jesus gathered around him a select group of men and women to carry on his work. There was nothing special about these men and women. In fact, they were quite ordinary. There was only one thing that distinguished them, they had been touched and chosen by Jesus. And when Christ left them, he gave them a mission. They were to reach out to others with Christ's unconditional love until the day comes when every person on this earth knows that God created them to be a child of God and that Jesus Christ laid down his life for them.

The empty crib, empty cross empty grave, tell the story of our risen Savior who brings hope through wholeness and forgiveness. They remind us that every person can experience the resurrection in their lives through Jesus, the Son of God.