

“Beyond the Empty Tomb”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Astronomers have found a big, empty place in the universe. A massive void. This hole is gigantic, nearly a billion light years across. Inside it there are no planets, no stars, no galaxies, no gases. It's just a huge cold spot. Our tiny heads cannot even begin to comprehend a hole that gigantic. It's been described as a big bubble in the cosmic pancake batter, where there is absolutely nothing. An empty place. An empty space.

The empty tomb. That the tomb is empty, void, is a massive, world-changing reality, that sometimes is difficult for our heads to comprehend.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians tries to comprehend the story of an empty place that had cosmic consequences. He had heard that on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene and two other women encountered a massive void when they showed up at the empty tomb, one that was as mind-boggling as anything at the edge of the universe. It was early when they arrived, and after meeting a young man and hearing about the resurrection, “they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Many of you who have lost close friends or a family member – have some idea of how empty Mary is feeling at this point. She has already suffered the

crucifixion of her friend and teacher Jesus and she's mourning his death deeply. Now she goes to his tomb and what does she find? Nothing. A huge cold spot. She didn't know you've got to pass through some empty tombs on the way to resurrection life.

But most of us here, know what it feels like. At sometime in life, each of us comes face to face with a massive void – a big empty place.

It happens when we're young and practicing hard to make the team and still don't make the team.

It happens when you study hard, take out student loans in pursuit of a profession but find you hate your work or worse yet, you love your work and get laid off or your position is eliminated.

We come face to face with a massive void, a big empty place when you give your heart to someone who doesn't accept the gift or worse yet, accepts the gift but then falls out of love later on.

It happens when you try to resist a temptation, but then give into it again and again.

When you put money into a pension or 401K or retirement plan, only to see it disappear into a massive void – a big empty place.

It happens when you lose a child or spouse to a car accident, a war, to disease and find yourself suddenly alone in the world. These are huge cold spots.

Massive voids.

Mary and her companions are seized by terror and amazement, and they retreat into silence, saying nothing to anyone. Their world feels like a billion light years of empty space. But it's to their everlasting credit that they take some time to ponder this strange event and let the disappearance of Jesus sink in.

Yes, it's true the mysterious young man in the tomb had said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here." This good news – the Easter morning good news of resurrection life. But the women cannot grasp it, at least not yet.

For now, it's all terror, amazement, and fear. How can they not be alarmed, amazed, terrified when they're standing face to face with an empty tomb?

I think too often you and I try to pretend there are no massive voids in our lives, no empty places. Our society and even some teachers and preachers tell us things like "believe in your self and you can do anything;" which sets us up to not do well when we come face to face with one of those empty spaces along the way. The truth is that bad things happen to good people and not every goal in life is realistic. You may believe you're going to earn a degree and get a great job along with a perfect family in a beautiful suburban home, but life doesn't always give you what you want. I think overblown expectations are largely to blame for the dramatic rise of anxiety, depression, and suicide. I was recently told by a young

woman, “It’s depressing to realize your dreams are never going to come true.”

She told me the story of walking down a street and seeing a frail, wizened old man rocking contentedly on a porch. She called out to him as she walked by, “Hello there! I couldn’t help but notice how happy you look. Tell me,” she said, “what’s your secret for a long, happy life?”

“I smoke 3 packs of cigarettes a day” he replied. “I drink a case of whisky a week, eat nothing but fast food, and never, ever do any exercise.”

“Wow!” said the woman, “that is amazing. Just how old are you?”

“Thirty-six,” he replied.

We’re all going to face some empty places in life. Loss and rejection are a part of every life story as each of us passes through some empty tombs on the way to resurrection life. Mary and her companions made this journey as they flee from the tomb. They feel a blast of terror, amazement, and fear as they are about to experience the surprising reality of the resurrection.

They’re about to discover that Easter is not about them – instead it’s about God. It’s about God filling the empty places in our lives with new and unexpected life.

A faithful and excited St. Paul proclaims the good news to the Corinthians: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day, and he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then

he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time. Last of all, as one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” The various appearances of the resurrected Jesus are very important to Paul because he sees the new life of Christ as being at the heart of the vitality of the church. St. Paul believes as we believe, that through the resurrection, God fills the empty places in our lives. He did it for the first followers of Jesus, for Paul, for the Christians of Corinth, and God fills the empty places for us.

The good news is that we don't have to earn or deserve this gift of new life. We simply believe and willingly follow Jesus into the future he's preparing for us. St. Paul believed in the resurrection and spread the gospel throughout the Roman empire. Mary and her companions felt a disorienting mixture of amazement and fear on Easter morning, but they responded when the young man gave the command, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

Believe in the resurrection. Follow Jesus into the future. Share your faith with others. These are responses we can make, responses that fill our empty places.

Think again about the enormous empty space that was recently discovered by astronomers. A gigantic hole with no planets, no stars, no galaxies, no gases – just a huge cold spot – not unlike a heart without God.

About 350 years ago, Pascal, a mathematician, philosopher, and physicist observed that the human heart is like an “infinite abyss.” He discovered that we human beings try in vain to fill our hearts with everything around us – education, jobs, homes, money, cars, friends, family. But Pascal said none of these earthly things can help “since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.” In spite of his brilliance and his contributions to mathematics, Pascal realizes that life apart from God is empty. He found refuge in Jesus Christ alone.

If you are feeling a massive void or an empty space in your life, you probably have already learned that your emptiness cannot be filled by a new career, a new spouse, a new house, a new car, or a better salary. The hole in your life can be filled by believing in the resurrection, by believing in Easter morning, by celebrating Christ every Sunday and following him into the future.

The good news of Easter is that Christ is risen and he wants to fill our empty places with his love and new life. Jesus has been raised from the dead and wants us to follow him into the future beyond the empty places. Beyond the empty tomb!

#389 - Christ is Alive! Let Christians Sing