

"The Insecure Tomb"
John 20:1-18
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Cottage Grove United Church of Christ
Cottage Grove, Minnesota
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Easter Sunday
Celebration Service

My sister and I never knew our grandparents, so several years ago we went to visit their graves at a cemetery in Southern California. They had been cremated, and their cremains were in a large mausoleum on the cemetery grounds. It was quite meaningful for us to visit their final resting place. Although we knew that *they* were long gone -- what remained were only little piles of ashes that had been sitting in two boxes in a wall for decades -- this was the closest we had ever come to our paternal grandparents. We "knew" them through pictures and stories, but to come this close to their bodies was powerful. My grandfather had died before I was born and my grandma was dead by the time I was a year old -- long before Rochelle was alive -- but being in the place where their bodies had been lain gave us an opportunity to grieve their loss in a way that we had never been able to do before.

Human beings have had a connection to the final resting places of their loved ones almost since the beginning of humanity itself. Burial grounds and cemeteries have taken on a respected significance throughout cultures, and people have felt a need to mourn at the place of burial forever.

It was no different for the culture in which Jesus lived and specifically for Mary Magdalene when she went to visit his tomb after his death. Imagine, then, her *abject horror* when she discovered that the stone that closed his tomb was no longer there and his body missing! We can almost *hear* the panic in her voice when she runs to tell Simon Peter and the other disciple, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him," and later when she repeats her sorrow to the two angels inside the tomb.

Although I did not know my grandparents, I can only imagine how panicked *I* would be if their final resting place had been disturbed when I traveled so far to visit it. I can imagine myself crying something very similar to Mary: "They have taken my grandparents away, and I do not know where they have laid them!" My lifelong grief would have been

compounded by the sadness of not knowing where the bodies of my grandparents now were, or how I was ever going to get them back. *This* was the panic of Mary at the tomb of the man she loved beyond life itself.

Wasn't Jesus' tomb supposed to be guarded by Roman soldiers? It was, but a crack job *they* were clearly doing. Either they had stolen his body themselves, or they had been asleep on the job, or *something*, because he had been peacefully resting in the tomb -- as peacefully as a man who has been brutally assassinated can rest -- and now he was gone.

This *could* have been the story of a simple grave robbing. The soldiers had already cast lots for his clothing at his crucifixion, so it would be no real surprise if they stole his body too. And yet we know *it was not that*. It *could* have been the story of political intrigue -- the Romans taking away Jesus' body to further oppress his followers. And yet we know *it was not that either*.

Instead of being the usual, sad story, we know that Mary's panic and her grief would give way to marvel, love, and unspeakable joy when she realized the *real* meaning of the empty grave. Jesus Christ, her Lord and our Lord, was risen from the dead. He *is* risen!

This unlikely story, about a simple rabbi and his peasant followers, became ever so much more because death *would not* have the final word. Because God had chosen to become incarnate in a "simple" man from Nazareth. Because God had chosen to make it clear that grace and love and *life* were (and are) more powerful than oppression and hatred and death.

What happened at the tomb that day was unbelievable, and for that reason even more wonderful. But we know, as Christians living more than two millennia after that moment, that the Resurrection was about far more than Jesus appearing to his followers for a little while after his death. He *remains* alive, in each one of us who believes and shares the Gospel story.

Although it meant a great deal to Rochelle and me to visit our grandparents' graves, they are, in fact, real to us *not* because we saw where their ashes are now stored but because we have inherited their characteristics and because we have heard their stories. They are real to us because, in a sense, they are still alive in these ways.

So it is with Christ. He is not real to us because he was buried in a tomb somewhere outside Jerusalem for a few days. Instead he is real to us because we hear the wonderful Gospel about his life and his Resurrection, and because we have (hopefully) inherited his characteristics of love for everyone, justice for the oppressed, and peace.

May Jesus Christ remain as real for us as he was for Mary when she recognized him. May we continue to inherit who he was and who he is, and may we never stop sharing the good news of his Resurrection. Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!

Now let us pray.