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Acts 10: 34 – 43  
 1 Corinthians 15: 1 – 11

Ps. 118: 1 - 2, 14 – 24  
 John 20: 1 – 18

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There is a story about a children's Sunday School class that was learning about the resurrection. One of the children in the class was a young boy named David. David had Down syndrome. Some of us are old enough to remember when the L'eggs brand of stockings came in plastic eggs, about the size of an ostrich egg. Well, the teacher had gathered a number of these eggs and given one to each of the children. The teacher then told the class to go outside and find something that represented new life to put in the egg.

It was a lovely day in early April and the children ran around the church property, looking for something to put in their eggs. After several minutes, they came back inside and, one-by-one, revealed the treasure that they had chosen to place in their egg. One little girl had scored a butterfly, which, as the egg was opened, gently flapped its wings as it crossed the room, and drifted through the open window back outside. Another child had a crocus. Another an azalea blossom. A little boy had tucked in some new, bright green grass. Still another child had part of an egg from a baby bird that had hatched. When it came time for David to open his egg though, there was nothing in it. "Oh, David!" some of the children said. "Didn't you see anything that was a sign of new life?" David was confused by their response. "But the tomb was empty!" he said with a shy, somewhat puzzled smile.

The Rev. Bob Stuhlmann, whose son, Christopher, has Down syndrome, tells this story. He says that he likes to tell stories about people with Down syndrome because they have a different way of seeing the world from us supposedly 'normal' people. It's not only helpful to approach life and scripture through their eyes, Stuhlmann says, it's educational.

The tomb is indeed empty. Well, except for a few linens and a couple of angels, depending upon who's doing the looking. Usually, empty is seen as something of a negative. The dictionary, in fact, defines it in the *via negativa*, as 'containing *nothing*, *not* filled or occupied.' Synonyms are: vacant, unoccupied, uninhabited, untenanted, bare, desolate, deserted, abandoned, or, in a slightly different sense, 'meaningless, hollow, idle, vain, futile, worthless or ineffective.' That sounds a lot more like Good Friday than Easter morning! And in the moment in which Mary Magdalene perceives it, the tomb – as well as her hopes and dreams – must feel exactly like that. Completely desolate, deserted, and abandoned. Futile, meaningless, ineffective. All that she has known in befriending and following Jesus. All this time. All this believing. Poof! All as empty as a burst balloon. So how can something so empty be so full of promise and good news and hope?

To step back for a moment, it's interesting that each of the three disciples who show up at the tomb have such different experiences of the tomb's *emptiness*. When Mary first approaches the tomb in the darkness of the early morning, she apparently stops in her tracks when she sees that the very large stone, which had closed the entrance to the tomb, has been rolled away. It is perhaps the last thing she expects. Or maybe next-to-the-last. Because the very last thing that Mary Magdalene (and the others, for that matter) seem to expect is the resurrected Jesus, despite his promises to that effect on numerous occasions.

John doesn't indicate that Mary looks inside the tomb at this point, just that she runs back to tell the guys what she has found. Most scholars think that the two who race with Mary back to the tomb

are Peter and John, possibly the author of this Gospel. John, or whoever it is, reaches the tomb first, and it is just as Mary has described it: open. So, he bends down to look into the cool, darkness. He sees the pieces of linen that had been wrapped around Jesus' body just lying there. Curiously, he doesn't go in. Perhaps he realizes that he is on holy ground. Perhaps he is afraid or uncertain of what to do. Perhaps he is trying to make sense of something that makes no sense.

Peter is his usual, impulsive self. Rushing up a few moments later, he bends down and, brushing by John, enters the tomb without hesitation. As his eyes get accustomed to the dim light inside the cave-like tomb, Peter looks around. The linens that had wrapped Jesus' body are folded at one end of the ledge on which the body had been laid. But the small cloth that had covered Jesus' face is lying rolled up at the other end. Grave robbers wouldn't have taken the time to do that, so if not them, then who? And why? Peter seems focused on the earthly or material aspects of the empty tomb.

By this time, John has decided to enter the tomb also. While Peter continues to shake his head in puzzlement at the emptiness, a light is beginning to dawn for John, that, maybe, just perhaps, it's a possibility that out of seeming nothingness, God has once again created *something*. John is responding to the spiritual aspects of the empty tomb. They both come back out of the tomb and head back in to the city, talking cautiously and yet excitedly about what they've experienced, and leaving Mary standing just outside the tomb, tears in her eyes.

With the men come and gone, Mary bends down to look into the tomb for herself. And she notices not the linens, but the angels who are now sitting there. Where were the angels just moments ago when Peter and John were looking around? Did they just not see them? Are angels always in seemingly empty places and we just don't notice? No matter, Mary notices. Mary, very matter-of-factly talks to the angels as if she does this every day. And perhaps she does. Because the depth of her loss pours out in her words to them. But their presence does nothing to alleviate the emptiness caused by Jesus' lack of presence in the tomb. Mary is consumed with the emotional aspects of the empty tomb.

These three, perhaps Jesus' closest friends, each respond in their own way to the empty tomb. Because in that moment, they don't yet comprehend just how pregnantly full the empty tomb really is. They don't yet realize that what has come to birth is a new creation with Jesus as its first fruits. One author has written that this first Easter is "God's great coming out party. The empty tomb is God's great exclamation point that comes in the middle of the sentence, assuring Mary and Peter and John – and us – that, at the end of the day, beauty will not be sullied, nor truth denied, nor goodness overcome." [Timothy George, *Books & Culture*, 1999]

In a moment, Mary will turn to face the silhouetted outline of a man who suddenly, in a very familiar voice, calls her name. Later this same day, Jesus will enter the locked room where many of the disciples cower in fear. In this moment, however, everything about the world changes. What now appears to be an empty tomb has swallowed death forever. What now appears to be an empty tomb turns out to be a womb in which the fullness of the resurrection has been incubated and cradled. What now appears to be an empty tomb has given new life to all of creation, really, all of the cosmos. Mary – and Peter and John – are witnesses to that. And so are we, as we live out the beauty, the truth and the goodness in our own lives. The tomb is empty, because the Lord is risen indeed! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! +