

April 5, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN

Easter Sunday
Mark 16:1-8
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

THE POWER OF EMPTY

Once upon a time, there was a young boy named Stephen. He had something wrong with his heart – grownups called it a worsening congenital heart disease. They would also quietly whisper among themselves that Stephen was also mentally challenged. But the other children in Stephen's Sunday school class just knew that sometimes he got tired when they were playing outside. Sometimes it took him a little longer when they were doing a craft or building something together after hearing a Bible story. Not a big deal.

On Easter morning one year, their Sunday school teacher had been reading them this story about the women followers of Jesus going to the tomb where Jesus' body had been buried. Now this was a class of 7- and 8-year-olds. Most of them were good readers and they could even think abstractly a bit. When their teacher told them that Jesus said he was "the light of the world," the kids all knew Jesus wasn't saying he was a lamp or a light bulb! Their teacher would encourage them to listen to the beautiful poetry telling about the mystery of God. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God," the teacher would read from the Gospel of John. He would ask them: "I wonder what you see when you hear that? What do you think?" The kids were used to thinking abstractly about Jesus.

But this morning, on Easter, the teacher just wasn't sure what sense the children would make out of this resurrection story. The class had been learning about how this young Jewish rabbi and traveling preacher had been healing people and challenging the religious authorities of his time. The kids knew about how Jesus had hung out with all kinds of people considered unimportant, people assumed to be low-life: people without a lot of money, people who worked for the hated Romans, people who were sick or whose bodies were differently-abled. The kids knew Jesus kept talking about loving your enemies, standing up to violent power and giving of oneself. The kids in this class also knew that Jesus had been killed by Imperial Rome because he was too big of a threat to people in power. Jesus had been hastily put in a tomb the evening he had died, and it hadn't really been a proper burial.

The Sunday School leader read this passage from Mark that we just heard, about some women friends of Jesus going to the tomb early in the morning to properly prepare his body with spices as was their custom before final burial. He read to them how the big rock in front of the tomb had been moved and the tomb was empty, except for some guy dressed in white – maybe an angel – who told the confused women that Jesus had risen, and was alive! "How

do you explain the resurrection to 7- and 8-year-olds?" the teacher wondered to himself.

Spring was just beginning in their part of the world. The world seemed so dead, and then, suddenly, there are signs of new life springing up all around! The teacher thought back about how many times his own life had felt like it was coming to a dead end, but how there had been love, friends, prayer, his church, new hope when he least expected it. Hmmmm, he thought to himself. The teacher decided to have the children go outside and find examples of new life in nature. Maybe this would help connect them to the mystery of the resurrection. So, he handed out some of those plastic Easter eggs that split in half. "OK, everyone," he explained, "I want you all to go outside and look around. Find something that represents new birth, new life in spring, and put it in your plastic egg." All the children, including Stephen, were excited to get outside and look around the churchyard and they wondered what they might discover.

When the children all bustled inside again, the teacher put all their egg-like plastic containers on the table. He looked at Stephen, who had a little crick of a smile on his face. The teacher had no idea if Stephen had understood what he was talking about or if the boy knew what to do with his egg. Tentatively, the teacher opened the first egg and out tumbled a tiny flower. "That's mine," exclaimed one of the other boys. "New life growing up out of the ground!" said the teacher. The next egg had a rock in it, and the teacher wondered to himself, "Oh, no this must be Stephen's." But a little girl shouted, "That's mine! See, it has fuzzy moss on the bottom of it – new life!" Another egg held some blades of grass, another contained a squiggly earthworm. But the next egg the teacher opened had nothing in it. He paused...and started to reach for another egg. Just then Stephen spoke up: "Wait, don't skip mine!" "But Stephen," the teacher gently replied, "your egg is empty." "Yeah, empty! Just like Jesus' tomb and that means new life for us," exclaimed Stephen.

How is it that out of emptiness, new life emerges? It's an idea that just doesn't make sense. It grates against our predominant culture that tells us that "full" is always better than "empty." A full bank account, a full refrigerator. A full-time job is best, a full heart is preferable. And these are nothing to scoff at because "empty" can bring enormous suffering. An empty wallet, empty plates at the table, not good. Same with empty stomachs, empty house, empty heart. But one of the problems with living in a world that celebrates "full" over "empty" is that we begin to think "empty" is the end of the story. A failure or mistake means we are a complete loser. Death of a beloved means we will never know love again. A missed opportunity obliterates all hope.

Yet, what the women on that Easter morning discover is that this empty tomb turns these assumptions upside down. Their teacher and friend was dead and is now alive. This was not some idea to be affirmed or denied; it is an immense energy that will eventually propel these women back into their lives in a

whole new way. After fear and amazement will come an awareness of Jesus' living presence among them, encouraging and emboldening them. They will become proclaimers of good news that death is *not* necessarily the end to life. Empty is not the end of the story, and, curiously, self-emptying will be the way to abundant life in the present. "Go and tell the other disciples," says the radiant creature in the empty tomb. "Jesus has gone ahead of you, up in Galilee like he promised. He's out in the world in a new way." Empty is not the end of the story.

At Easter, you and I are reminded that there is a parallel universe to all that seems so important in our visible world. It's the unseen universe of God's persistent attention and love that says that tragedy, despair, even death are not the last word. And God is continually bringing new possibilities and hope to us while we live and even after we die. In some strange sense, the Christian Church claims that with Easter, death is now dead. In emptiness, paradoxically, there can be the power of new life. The empty places in our lives may actually become cleared ground. They can become the wide-open space that God needs for new growth within us, for re-focused priorities, for change. This is a huge thing to claim and we can spend a lifetime absorbing this mysterious reality. And so we begin again. Christ is Risen. Thanks be to God. Alleluia and Amen.

(Note: The story of Stephen and the empty egg container has circulated on the Web for years, although its origin is unknown.)