Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Not Here”
Mark 16:1-6

“He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.” These were not words the three women who went to the tomb that morning were expecting to hear, much less what they expected to see.

What they had expected to see was the cold entrance to a tomb blocked by a large stone when they went out to anoint Jesus’ body, wrapped in linen cloth, lying in the tomb in the same place where Joseph of Arimathea had laid him. That’s what they expected to see.

And then as if in an instant, everything they had been expecting to see, everything they had been expecting to do changed.

It was all changed because instead of a cold stone slab in their way, they saw the stone rolled away already. It was all changed because instead of guards like they might’ve expected to see, there was, as Mark describes it, a young man dressed in a white robe. It was all changed most of all because the young man, who somehow knew why they had come said, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.”

And just with those words, “He has been raised; he is not here,” everything was different.

In terms of things being different, I believe I am safe in assuming that this is not the kind of Easter you were expecting to see. No doubt many of you enjoy certain traditions within your household, some to do with the church, with family, with friends. Heck, for some of us, what we had expected this Easter Sunday might have been come to church, go to lunch, and then fall asleep watching the Masters this afternoon. That’s what we might have been expecting to see. But that’s all changed.

I know a lot has changed from what I was expecting. I can’t claim to speak for Andy, but just because he and I are in a similar boat he might feel the same way. We are both in our first Easters at new churches. That’s an exciting thing. I was imagining a beautiful spring day—nope—the choir full and in its usual top form—top form, certainly, but just a small group—the sanctuary bursting with people—it’s almost comical to say that while looking at an empty sanctuary. No, this is certainly not the Easter I was expecting, and I’d bet it wasn’t the Easter you were expecting either.

No matter how well online worship has gone these past few weeks, and it has truly been encouraging, I’ll admit there is still a tinge of discouragement to do ministry primarily by email and Zoom meetings and to lead worship in an empty sanctuary.

Absence will do that: discourage us. My weekly grocery run sometimes takes me by West Town Mall. I drive past it, and every time it seems kind of eerie, like I missed the memo on some zombie apocalypse, because it hits me that there are no cars in the parking lot. And I’ll admit, it comes as a discouragement. Absence will do that.

Recently there have been various photographs of the same phenomenon taking place in some of the busiest and well-known places in the world. Saint Mark’s Square in Venice, vacant.
The Taj Mahal in India, barely anyone. The French Quarter in New Orleans, ghost town. The Eiffel Tower, empty. Time Square, only a trickle of people.

I’m sure you’ve seen it locally too: places where you’re used to seeing some bustle, aren’t bustling. Restaurants, empty; stores, empty; schools, empty. And you see it all, and for financial reasons, for social reasons, just for spiritual reasons, it’s discouraging, it’s disorienting. Absence will do that.

I can only imagine what the women felt when they went to the tomb, going expecting one thing, all of that changing, and to top it all, the one they had been going to see, to anoint, wasn’t there. No doubt in those first moments, discouraging, disorienting, frightening. Absence will do that.

So why does this young man at the tomb, this angel, make absence out to be some kind of good news? “He is not here,” he says.

It is powerful to me, and kind of eerie, that the very first communication of the good news of the resurrection is ultimately this young man declaring Christ’s absence. “He has been raised; he is not here.” It changes everything.

Not just his absence, though. If Jesus had just been absent, it would’ve meant that someone stole his body. But he is absent because he has been raised. Look where he used to be. He left. He’s somewhere else. He’s no longer in this place of death. He’s alive. He’s on the move. It defies common belief, common perception, that a man who was dead is now no longer. It changes how you see this place of death, this tomb, because now you see it as a sign of God’s power, a sign of God’s love, a sign of God’s grace, you no longer see it as the final destination, a place of hopelessness, a place of inevitability, and the reason you don’t see it that way anymore is precisely because he is not here. He has been raised. And it changes how you see everything.

I wonder what would happen if today, we looked out at the empty places of the world through the same lens. Sure, we can choose to look at the same pictures of Times Square and the Eiffel Tower, see them empty and be discouraged. We can look at the deserted parking lots and get scared. We can even look out at an empty sanctuary and feel disheartened.

Or, we can look at the empty places of the world like we look at the empty tomb. Instead of signs of anxiety or fear or suspicion, we see them as signs of power, of love, of hope. Because, in this odd, mind-boggling time, when all expectations are turned on their head, we know that in this season showing care, concern, and love for your neighbor means first of all to stay away from your neighbor. It’s counterintuitive, goes against every God-given impulse we have to help others, but it’s the truth.

So when we look out at the empty places of the world, instead of being scared, we see signs of millions of people, billions of people, acting in solidarity and out of care for one’s neighbor. It means that we are saying together that for this season out of concern for each other, we will endure the hardship, the financial hardship, the social hardship, the spiritual hardship, of being absent from each other’s lives.

It means that when we look out and see an empty sanctuary, we don’t see absence as despair but as hope, as a sign that there is something at work in all of this that is not of this world, as a sign of new life that is already on the move even when we can’t see it.

And it means that when we think that God is absent, not here, because the tomb is empty, we might instead see it to mean that God is at work in a way we could never have expected to see.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.