

## **“Empty-Tomb Faith”**

**First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
April 16, 2017**

**Old Testament lesson: Psalm 118:1-2, 21-24**

**New Testament lesson: John 20:1-10**

At my home, our cat can outrun our dog. Maybe that's normal; for sure, it's a good thing for the cat. There are two times when this cat-and-dog foot race happens – 1) when the cat wants to play and goes tearing through the house, and 2) at mealtime.

Tabi – that's the cat – Tabi is the first one in the kitchen when it comes to mealtime. She has to be fed immediately, while Lacey, the Corgi, is happy to wait until her food arrives.

People are like that when it comes to our faith, and other basic needs. Some of us are downright starving for the faith – craving that next spiritual insight, poignant scripture passage, or that personal encounter that you just know is a God moment.

Others happily pace themselves in living out their faith – morning prayer, Sunday worship, weekly Bible study, volunteering at church or in the community, listening to Christian praise music. There are lots of different ways to interact with the faith and live into our calling as followers of Jesus.

All different types of people were called to faith by Jesus during his earthly ministry some 2,000 years ago, and still are today.. For his earliest followers, the most difficult and amazing encounter with Jesus – with the faith – was the empty tomb.

In today's Gospel lesson, we see two different types of people – Peter and John – having their very first encounter with “empty-tomb faith.” Empty-tomb faith is the most powerful faith there is. Empty-tomb faith is the faith that you and I have. Because we have never seen Jesus in the flesh; our faith in the resurrection is based on the empty-tomb.

When Peter first encounters the empty tomb, he's hungry for faith like Tabi's hungry for food – he can't get there quick enough. In he goes, into the tomb. Meanwhile, John has a more paced and confident faith – he gets to the tomb first, and then takes it step by step. Very different approaches to the faith.

As John describes it, “The two (of them) were running together, but the other disciple (John) outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.” John takes his time going deeper in the faith, pacing himself. We all have a different pace when it comes to going deeper in the faith.

Some of us are in the place of white-hot faith, like the faith of Peter jumping headlong into the empty tomb, or like the time he stepped out on the water – that’s white-hot faith! White-hot faith is what Steve Addison describes in his book “Movements That Change the World: Five Keys to Spreading the Gospel.” Addison describes white-hot faith as “the engine room of a dynamic movement.”<sup>1</sup> White-hot faith is what had Peter say to Jesus, earlier in the Gospel, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” even though no one else saw it at the time. White-hot faith is a great place to be. You know what you know because you know it in your heart. From that place, you can do anything, go anywhere, and never lose sight of God.

But then the world pushes in on you, -on us- pressures mount, and your faith begins to cool. That’s when we need a more solid foundation to stand on. Maybe that’s why when Peter said to Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” Jesus said, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Jesus took Peter’s white-hot faith and used it to lay the foundation for the church, the gospel movement.

Having a solid foundation – that’s the next characteristic of a dynamic movement, according to Addison. Addison calls this foundation a commitment, commitment to a common purpose, such as spreading the gospel and changing the world. Jesus calls this foundation the church, the place we come to nurture our faith and the faith of others. That’s our commitment, our common purpose. And it can be done in a lot of different ways, from mission outreach to Sunday school, from Sunday worship to our Wednesday LOGOS ministry for children and youth, and many other ways.

However it is that you participate in the community of faith is just fine. The important thing is to participate, and then look for where God is leading to go you deeper in the faith. Church is the place where we take our sense of spirituality and give it life, as the “hands and feet of Jesus.” The tomb is empty and Jesus is risen! And so we are his hands and feet. The places he walked, the people he touched, the blessings he gave are now our places and people and blessings – to be visited and lifted up and shared.

I pray to God you’re having a moment of white-hot faith right now! And that Jesus will touch you on the shoulder, turn to you, and says, “You are my rock, a building block in my church. Through you I will accomplish my mission, my purpose, day by day, as you go deeper in the faith.” John looked into the empty tomb, and then paused, thinking no doubt about what all this means and how it might change his life.

Do you ever think about that? About how the empty tomb changes your life? Take the time this week to think about what your faith means to you.

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<sup>1</sup> “Author interview with Ed Stetzer” at <https://www.movements.net/books/movements-that-change-the-world/author-interview/>

It's OK to not fully know the answer – all that your faith means to you and your life. But you know it means something, or that it should. If that's you, start there. Even doubting Thomas had a place among the disciples.

We are not called to be perfect Christians; only Christ is perfect. Our calling is to faith – an empty-tomb faith that doesn't fully understand all the mysteries of God, and a more paced and thoughtful faith that seeks to go ever deeper, one step at a time.

This church – this community of faith – is a safe and welcoming place to do just that. Taking it one step at a time is OK; we all are at different places in the faith. And that's OK. Because the one place we have in common is the empty tomb, and how incredibly and mysteriously it gives way to the fullness of life. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Holy God, when we were washed in the waters of baptism, we died to our old lives and rose to a new life in Christ.

Thank you, Dear Lord, for raising us up in your saving grace, and claiming us as your own.

Give us a keen sense of the miracle of the resurrection, that we might live resurrection lives that reflect who we are called to be as Christians.

Open our hearts to the mystery of the empty tomb, that we might empty ourselves in service to others, confident in your desire to fill our lives with all that is good and faithful and joyous.

Let us be bold witnesses to your care and comfort of those in need – and instrumental in its provision. Where there is need, O Lord, send us, equipped to serve in whatever way we can, by the power of your Spirit, and to the glory of you alone.

We pray for those who remember loved ones with today's Easter lilies, that they - - and all of us -- would know the assurance of a resurrection faith.

We pray for those whose needs you know, O Lord, and even now have plans to fulfill.

All this we pray in the name of the Risen Lord, Jesus the Christ, who gave to us the Lord's Prayer that we might pray with one voice, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive  
our debtors;  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**