

A priest was driving through the deepest, most back woods part of Southeast Texas. He stopped at a one-pump gas station. Seeing that the priest had one arm in a cast, the proprietor of the station came out to help him fill his car. As he started pumping the gas, Bubba, in his overalls and grimy cap said, “Why are you dressed like that?” “I’m a Roman Catholic priest,” came the reply. “What happened to your arm?” asked Bubba. “I fell in the bathroom and broke it against the commode,” said the priest. When Bubba went into the station to get the priest’s change, Bobby, who was sitting inside, said, “Why is he dressed like that?” “He’s a Roman Catholic priest.” said Bubba. “What happened to his arm?” asked Bobby. “He broke it on the commode.” “What’s a commode?” asked Bobby. “How in world should I know?” “I’m a Baptist, not a Roman Catholic.”

We should know by now that the walk to Emmaus story carries a lot of meaning with it. People often concentrate on the spiritual opening of the disciples’ eyes, going from blindness to sight through Jesus’ breaking of the bread and his opening of the Scriptures. And of course the disciples’ sight is critical to understanding the story. But there is more to consider as we walk toward Emmaus this morning.

As I have read Luke chapter 24 again and again throughout this Lenten sermon series I have noticed a couple of things that I never saw before. For instance, the tomb is mentioned quite a lot before Easter, but doesn’t get much press coverage afterwards. Few words are spoken in the gospels about the vacant grave of Jesus. Most of us would rather not stop and linger beside an empty grave, scratching our heads, anyway. And that is exactly what happens after Jesus’ resurrection.

John records, in a somewhat anticlimactic way, that once some of the disciples saw the open sepulcher, *“Then the disciples went back to where they were staying”* (John 20:10).

Mark’s gospel ends on a similar note: *“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid”* (Mark 16:8).

No town crier announced Jesus’ resurrection to everyone in Jerusalem, just the contemplation of an empty tomb. This week we hit the “pause” button and spend some time wondering about the message of an empty, silent tomb. We add the words “Silent Tomb” to the picture of two travelers walking with the risen Christ on the Road to Emmaus as they pass an empty tomb.

But first, a word of caution. There is one very important thing to avoid as we contemplate the meaning of a tomb with no corpse. And that is, we must keep moving on our Emmaus Road so that we aren’t stuck beside the empty tomb, unable to move forward or backward; in a perpetually neutral position.

Jeff Christopherson and Matt Rogers wrote an article for *Christianity Today* that recently caught my attention. It says, “Cars rarely operate in neutral, but churches do all the time. Maybe this is because neutral is the normative posture of those who make up the church... It’s common to hear people speak as if there are three possible positions for life in relation to God. Some are in *drive*—moving forward in active obedience to the Great Commission. Others are in *reverse*, demonstrating rebellion against God’s authority and living to undermine God’s mission in the world. The rest are sitting in *neutral*—somewhere between drive and reverse [unable to move].

Those in the first position are the missionary superstars of the church. They preach, lead, or better yet, they go across the world to take the gospel to those who’ve never heard. Those in reverse are clear

enemies to the gospel. They flaunt their depravity through heinous acts that are universally decried as wicked.

Then there's everyone else—the mass of humanity who saunters through life in a seemingly *neutral* posture. Some of these *neutral* people profess faith in Jesus yet perceive of their existence as morally and missionally *neutral*, devoid of meaning most of the time. Others do not believe, however their posture toward life differs little from their *neutral*, supposedly believing friends. They simply live making decisions and investing time in ways that have little significance beyond the meagre reach of their influence, or so they think.” Rogers and Christopherson conclude that everything we do either propels God's mission forward or hinders the embodiment of his kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.

So if *neutral* is not the place we want to park ourselves on the Emmaus Road, what message should we take from the “Silent Tomb” today before we move on down the road with the resurrected Jesus?

In practically every culture on the face of the earth, when a loved one dies we treat the body with respect, laying it to rest usually on the day of the funeral in our North American culture. This helps us with a sense of *closure*—an important part of the grieving process. However, seeing the corpse may also stir up a host of feelings connected to the one who is now departed. It can sometimes be a tangible reminder of regrets, sadness, unfinished business, tangled memories, or unanswered questions.

The tomb of Jesus with no corpse to be found, however, changes all this. Death was powerless to hold his body in its grip. The vacant grave proclaims that death no longer has the last word, and the corpse has lost its voice of woe. A deceased body may still stir emotions and conjure thoughts, but the silent tomb of Jesus speaks louder, with more authority, and surely with much more comfort and hope.

This means that believers are called to live without a tangible sense of closure. God cannot be boxed into our limited imaginations or expectations. Life does not end in the cemetery, and the pall of death that visiting a grave casts over those who are still living has lost its sting. Jesus is on the loose, somewhere in the world that he brought into being, doing unexpected things. Even though the Gospel writers make scant mention of the Silent Tomb, we should never mistake the empty tomb as a benign detail of the Lent and Easter journey, easily glossed over as incidental. On the contrary, it speaks with a powerful voice of the unfinished story of a life of faith—the open-ended road ahead that is prepared by God that leads us to places we cannot *imagine*. An empty grave testifies that this is a venture that even death, the final enemy, is now powerless to stop.

Junlei Li wrote a piece titled, “What Nourishes the Imagination?” on the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning & Children's Media site a few years ago. She begins by quoting Mr. Rogers. “Imagining something may be the first step in making it happen,” he wrote, “but it takes the real time and real efforts of real people to learn things, make things, turn thoughts into deeds or visions into inventions.”

Fred Rogers wondered, “What nourishes the imagination? Probably more than anything else, loving adults who encourage the imaginative play of children's own making.” As such, loving adults, whether parents or teachers, wonder what concrete forms such encouragement might take.

Ms. Pajak, a Pittsburgh Public Schools kindergarten teacher, asked the children to take their time to notice the details of small electronic gadgets and then sketch the objects. Ms. Pajak moved from table to table to engage each child in the room. Even though her interaction with each child lasted no more than 20 seconds, the feedback and encouragement she offered was consistent and powerful. She reminded them that “We are never, ever done [noticing and sketching]!” Her message was simple: It is all right to persist,

it is all right to wonder, it is all right to take your time to do something difficult and let something grow. And the children did just that.

While we have hit the “pause” button to spend some time wondering about the message of an empty, Silent Tomb, *our imaginations* can open our eyes, our hearts and our minds to the presence of One who stepped out of the shroud, out of death’s grip, out of the Silent Tomb to live forever so that we too may live.

The sudden and mysterious disappearance of Jesus once he was recognized by the two disciples reminds us of the new reality Jesus has inaugurated. It’s really a teaser, I would say, for a life we can only begin to *imagine*. Reflecting on the words of the Apostle Paul from his letter to the Ephesians can awaken *our imaginations* even though we are not Ephesians and we have never met Paul.

Listen to the ascription that Paul places right at the center of his epistle: “*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us . . .*” (Ephesians 3:20). Is it even possible to *imagine* the immeasurable power of God?

Listening to the message of the Silent Tomb will help us to *imagine* anything! Amen.