

Can you remember the visitation at a funeral home or church for someone you love? What did you expect and how did you feel as you walked in and faced what you really didn't want to face? I can't imagine any anticipation or nervousness as in a moment like that. For these women who came to finally pay their last respects with the appropriate actions, it was a tear-filled, slow walk filled with the same pain, regret, grief and loss that each of us has carried on that same journey. But the tomb was empty! The body was gone!

We need to pause and think about the confusion that caused. It didn't make sense then and doesn't make sense today. Who would expect such a sight? Can you imagine the confusion, the shock, the disbelief? They had come to face one reality and left with an image so different than what they expected. How long did it take to sink in?

How incredible that so much joy would eventually be found in a place where the world sees only failure, fear, and despair! But isn't that the reality of all life? We spend most of our lives gathering stuff and filling empty spots in our lives with anything we can find. We even fill death with anything we can to soften its impact and make it easier to face.

And yet, *Jesus died with nothing, completely alone, having been stripped of everything.* Even his tomb was empty. What a miracle was underway ... and what confusion for women who came prepared to honor a dead, earthly Messiah.

Vikings filled the boats of their fallen warriors with weapons, gold, and silver. Ancient Egyptians loaded tombs with food, clothing, and wealth, to provide "stuff" for life in the world to come. When I was in Toledo, there was a large contingent of gypsies. Their customs at funerals were interesting to say the least. A friend who was a funeral director explained to me how they filled the casket of a loved one with food, money, and bottles of booze so there would be something to carry them into the next life. While we can smirk, don't we find ways to soften the blow in our own lives as well?

We find ways to cheat or ignore what we can't escape. To hope against hope. We are so fearful of the emptiness of death we do all we can to change its impact. We can't let go and we fear the emptiness death brings. There are so many ways that people pretend it isn't real or ways that we can soften the blow.

More and more common in our culture is the decision for an immediate burial and a memorial service at a later date. That was only intensified during the quarantines associated with the COVID pandemic. As families are scattered and schedules increasingly complicated, it is often difficult to find time for death in our lives. To be honest, any way that we can forestall or soften its impact is important too.

This is not to be critical of anyone but to admit that we don't like to face death! Whatever we can delay is easier to deal with "down the road." We have so much trouble adjusting our schedules to death that we would rather not. Those women came to the tomb on Easter, not with any hope but only to carry out a ritual that would make them feel better and sweeten the pain of a loss they couldn't comprehend. They came to fill death with sweet smells and loving actions to help them face what none of them wanted to face.

The key for us is to be changed by Christ's new life rather than confused by the powers of this world. Life is filled with valuables that only die and takes up space. Like roadside shrines of

plastic flowers, little white crosses, and fading teddy bears, we want to change death with our actions and fear giving up control and living with faith. But we must let go and let Jesus be the power and glory that empties tombs and brings life to dead places.

What Satan tried to fill; God has emptied. And where we are empty, Jesus fills! Easter is the Good News and the one moment that changes all other moments – forever!

We would rather focus on birth and babies (like Christmas) rather than empty tombs in graveyards. And yet, this is where life begins, *as faith takes root in an empty tomb!*

Anyone can celebrate a birth, but joy in the face of earthly death takes more than any of us can figure out on our own. Just as swaddling cloths were a sign to shepherds that the baby Jesus was Messiah, on Easter the cloth wrappings of death became a sign that Jesus had grown into his role and accomplished what he was born to do!

As we grow to accept that our greatest fear HAS been changed by Jesus, then living takes on a new flavor and fragrance of celebration and peace rather than one of obsessing over what we can gather and hang on to! Death is painful but must not be feared.

A widow once told me that she never goes to her husband's grave. She said my friends don't understand, they wonder if maybe I am in denial or didn't love him as they thought I should? But disciples understand. Don't you? Maybe the words of the angel can help, "Why look for the living among the dead?" There is nothing wrong with whatever helps any of us to grieve as long as we are clear about our future hope. For once you have tasted the joy of Easter, who would ever be satisfied with feasting on death and grief?

Our reality always ends in death. When faith frees us to look at the empty tomb – God's spirit fills us with life and joy beyond what we could have ever dreamed. Once you stand face to face with empty tomb and walk away rejoicing -- life will never be the same!

*But you MUST begin at the tomb!* Ignoring, hiding, or pretending won't change anything! Any therapist will affirm that death can only be dealt with if it is faced head on ... that is THE essence of the Gospel as well! Disciples struggled to go to the tomb, just as we always will, but once they looked, they discovered they never had to return!

You must face this tomb so that the MIRACLE of the RISEN CHRIST can be the power that changes your life! Faith challenges each day to begin with the Resurrection refrain, "why look for the living among the dead?" He is risen; and life will never be empty again! It all begins by facing the empty tomb ... and letting that joy change the rest of your life. Face it! The tomb IS empty! Finally, and forever, Good News for one and for all!