Easter Sunday, April 22, 1984
THE MIRACLE OF THE EMPTY TOMB
John 20:1-9

We don't talk very much about tombs in our time. We talk more about crosses. Perhaps that's because we see so few tombs, and we see so many crosses. Some theologians have suggested that Christians have exaggerated the cross as a symbol and have forgotten the empty tomb. We often talk about having to bear a cross, but we seldom talk about escaping the tombs we find ourselves in. IN Christian tradition there are 14 stations of the cross, but there are no stations of the empty tomb. There are many famous paintings of the crucifixion, and many kinds of crosses, some used as jewelry and in other forms of decoration. But I'm not aware of any well-known paintings of the empty tomb, nor have I seen jewelry bearing symbols of the empty tomb.

The cross is a symbol of death, while the empty tomb is a symbol of new life. Do you suppose we believe more in suffering and death than we do in new life?

Matthew Fox notes that the cross, no matter how one draws it, is profoundly linear. And it can be easily turned on its side to be a sword, and it has. Crusades, inquisitions, witch burnings, persecution of heretics — all done in the name of the cross. It's almost as if Constantine, upon his and the Roman Empire's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century, uttered a well-fulfilled prophecy when he declared: "In the name of this cross we shall conquer."

The cross has played the role or weapon time and time again in Christian history and empire building. Thus, it has and still is often connected with armies and military symbols. Remember the hymn — "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus, going on before; Christ the royal Master, leads against the foe; forward into battle, see his banners go."

I'm not at all sure the military metaphor is a good one for the Christian faith and its mission in the world. The cross is a symbol of violence and death, while the empty tomb is a symbol of peace and new life. And Easter is about empty tombs and new life!

The empty tomb is the last — and first — word of Christian belief. The cross was an invention of the Roman Empire who hung Jesus upon it. The Empty Tomb, on the other hand, is the product of Divine imagination. The Empty Tomb is God's answer to the crosses we continually construct and use.

And this is what Easter is all about — the reality of resurrection, of new life, here and now. The empty tomb is about the power of God in our lives which is able to free us from the slaveries and fears in which we find ourselves. Just as Jesus came out of the tomb, so he calls us to come out of our tombs.

What, then, are some of the things which keep us from experiencing the miracle of the empty tomb in our own lives and thus keep us from the joy of Easter?

Perhaps the biggest block for all of us is the fear of change. And new life always signifies change. This fear has been with us human beings for a long, long time.

Paul Tillich in a book entitled, The Courage to Be, claims that Christianity at the time of its beginning had only one strong rival, and that was the spirit and philosophy of Stoicism.

Of course, there were many competing religious systems in the Greek-Roman world, but in terms of basic views of reality, Stoicism was the opposite of Christianity. The essence of Stoicism is a spirit of resignation toward all things. Reality is regarded as fixed and static and human beings are felt to have little real power to alter or modify anything. Reality is not going to change on its own, and no one has the power to change it. Therefore, the appropriate human stance is one of accepting and adjusting and coming to terms with "things-as-they-are."

Christianity, on the other hand, has the opposite view of reality. It affirms that reality is dynamic and not static, and because we human beings are made in the image of this dynamism, we, too, possess real potency to make things happen. Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible bear witness to a God "who can make the things out of the things that are not." This means that creativity and ingenuity are built into creation. God is always at work making things new, and we are called to be creative.

To use a simple example: A Stoic would move into an old house and ask, "How can I manage to live here with things as they are?" The Christian would move in with relish and excitement and say, "Let's see! What can God and I together do to expand and renovate and fulfill the potential of this place?"

All behavior then and now grows out of some vision of reality, and to see things as static and oneself as basically powerless will lead to one way of being in the world, while to see all reality as dynamic — ourselves included — will lead to a very different way of living.

A lot of people still believe in the Stoic way of understanding reality. And there must be some evidence for it; otherwise, it would not have as wide a following as it still does.

Who among us has not at times felt overwhelmed by realities that we could not change or deep frustrations with how little comes really out of our best efforts to alter anything significantly?

Years ago, I remember hearing about a social worker who was reading a case history to some of her colleagues at one of their regional meetings. She told about walking through an urban ghetto one day and seeing a little boy sitting on the stairs of a tenement who was little more than a crumpled heap of human flesh. His deformity was so startling that she could not suppress the desire to inquire more fully into the matter. It turned out that he had been hit by a car several months before, but his parents, who were fresh from Appalachia, knew little about the complex systems of the city and had not gotten him to proper medical attention. His present condition was what had resulted, and, although he was not part of her case load, out of genuine human compassion, she took him to an orthopedist at a nearby medical school and learned after extensive examinations that there was hope through a long and involved series of operations that the child's body might be brought back to normality. She raised the money and got the whole process going.

A full two years after the child entered the hospital, she reported hearing a gentle knock on her office door, and to her amazement, the lad walked in on his own two feet. He even turned a cartwheel for her to demonstrate the completeness of his recovery. The two embraced each other warmly for what had been accomplished, and when he left, the social worker reported a kind of quiet glow permeating the whole office. She said to herself, "If I never accomplish anything else in my life, at least here is one person to whom I can point as having made a real difference."

At that point she paused in her presentation and said, “This was all several years ago now. Do you know where that boy is today?” And caught in the idealism of the moment, several speculations were made: a teacher, a surgeon, maybe even a social worker. But then there was an even longer pause, and with emotion the speaker said, “No, he’s in prison for one of the worst crimes that a human bring can commit.” Then she said, “I was instrumental in teaching him to walk again, but there was no one to teach him where to walk.”

Sometimes our best efforts do seem frustrated, and we wonder about the miracle of the empty tomb. The cross seems a more apt symbol. No wonder the philosophy of Stoicism is so tempting at times and has stayed alive through the years.

But the Christian vision as revealed by Jesus and the Old Testament before him proclaims that people can and do change. Reality is not static! God is dynamic and God is still creating, and we are called to be creative, too.

This is what the miracle of the empty tomb on Easter is all about. Before his death Jesus reminded people that they were intimately related to God and to each other. As a result, they began to believe that they did have worth and could make a different with their lives as they collaborated with a dynamic God and with each other.

What Jesus taught was not new. It had been alive in history since the beginning of time. But in Jesus, people saw and experience it in a new and fresh way. When Jesus began his ministry, he took a passage from the Old Testament for his announcement. “The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

Thus, when we read the gospel stories, we find that Jesus’ ministry was spent in freeing people, in unbinding them, in releasing them from their tombs. Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free!” He lived the freedom that comes only from God. But freedom is also a threat to anyone who wants to control us, and it’s a threat to those who want to be controlled by someone or something. True freedom always has its oppositions. That’s why Jesus was executed.

The hope and dynamism of Jesus offended the people who wanted things to stay the way they were. They turned against him with a vengeance, and he was put on trial and executed. If reality ever seemed to be static and human effort futile, it was that first Holy Week. But then came the miracle of the empty tomb. And it happens over and over again. Easter is built into creation itself. We can choose to go with it or go against it. We can be open to it or closed to it.

When we are open to God’s grace, which was shown most clearly in the empty tomb, then miracles also happen in our own lives.

Here’s what happened to one individual. He was born illegitimate, and through infancy and early childhood was raised solely by his mother, who was both deaf and dumb, in the slums of Chicago. When he was five years old, the state, believing that no such mother could be competent to raise a child, took him and placed him away from her without warning or explanation and placed him in a succession of three foster homes, where he was subject to rather routine indignities and with a total absence of affection.

At the age of 15, he became partially paralyzed as the result of a rupture of a congenital aneurysm of one of the blood vessels in his brain. At 16, he left his final set of foster parents and began living by himself. Predictably, at the age of 17, he was jailed for a particularly vicious and meaningless assault. He received no psychiatric treatment in jail.

Upon his release, after six months of boring confinement, the authorities got him a job as a menial stockroom clerk in a rather ordinary company. No psychiatrist or social worker in the world would have foreseen his future as anything but grim. Within three years, however, he had become the youngest department head in the history of the company. In five years, after marrying another executive, he left the company and eventually succeeded in his own business, becoming a relatively wealthy man. In addition, he had become a loving and effective father, a self-educated intellectual, and community leader and an accomplished artist.

I believe the miracle of the empty tomb appears over and over again in our world and in the lives of people if we let it. Easter says, “Come out of your tomb! Do not be afraid of new life. Do not be afraid of change. Do not be afraid to be free and creative.” The cross is not the final fact! Easter is! Amen.