

Sermon: **THE TOMB IS ALWAYS EMPTY**

Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Saint Matthew's UMC

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Easter Sunday

The first time I died was about twenty years ago. I was going through a really dark, difficult time. The choices that I was making and ways that I was being in the world and in relationships were hurting me and people that I loved and I wasn't really aware of it. I wasn't willing to be as aware as I knew I needed to be until I got confronted with it. And when I really faced it, it just killed me. I literally felt like the person that I was, this Steve that I was trying to be was an illusion. I felt as if there was actually nothing there, there was no person to be that made any sense. It really did feel like the only thing to do was to let Steve go. Just let him die. That felt right.

The hard part about this was that it was Holy Week. That Sunday was Easter and I was going to have to preach. Everybody would be there, and everybody wants a good inspiring sermon on Easter. Everybody wants to hear the Pastor say, "Christ is risen" so they believe it in their hearts. And I thought, "I can't say that." My Christ wasn't risen. He was still in that grave. All week long while I was wrestling with those inner experiences and feeling that sense of dying I also had to put together the Easter service, all about life and resurrection.

I picked the hymns, I wrote the prayers, I put the service together wondering, "What am I going to preach?" I was looking for a picture to put on the front of the bulletin and there were a lot of really sentimental pictures of sunrises and flowers and I thought, "You know it's not about happiness, it's something else." There were pictures of Jesus risen from the grave, but most of them are just awful. You know, they're just this young twenty something guy in a brand new bathrobe stepping into the room, so self possessed and calm as if nothing had just happened. His hair was always perfect, you know like a Breck shampoo commercial. And I thought, "No, that's not my Jesus, that doesn't work for me." And then I ran across this old print, an etching from a few centuries ago of Jesus marching up out of a casket as if he had just come up from downstairs like somebody just stepping out of the bathtub, stepping over the rim, one foot still in the darkness. I thought, "There's my Jesus: somebody for whom being raised isn't so clean and easy." That was the picture that I put on the cover. And that Easter, Sunday I couldn't quite say Christ has risen. The best I could do was to say, "Christ is rising. He's rising indeed."

Since then that's become my favorite way to think about it. Easter isn't just about something that happened once. It's what happens, and what is still happening. Jesus was completely in tune with God. He opened himself completely; he allowed God to pour all of God's love into him until he was just God's love and nothing else. And so he was not afraid to pour himself into the lives of others. He poured himself into our suffering and our betrayal and our weakness and our wounds. He poured himself into our despair and our guilt and our shame. He poured himself out to death until there was nothing left but God. And God is infinite. God is love. God is the love that created this universe, the love that made the big bang happen, the love that's making these trees suddenly turn green in a way that they weren't a week ago. That power, that life was so complete in Jesus that when they killed him it didn't matter. Love can't be buried. It endures even the greatest evil; even death.

This is the way life is. Love is always here and love is infinite power. We can allow ourselves to be filled with God's love. We then become part of something that is infinite and eternal, something that overcomes every obstacle, every hurt, every fault, every failure. When we pour ourselves out in love, God pours God's love into us. And that love, being infinite, makes our lives take on an infinite quality. We open our hearts and we allow God to pour infinite love into us, love that overcomes death itself. This is always happening, every moment. We open our hearts to receive God's love and through it we enter into life that is eternal. Easter teaches us to see that miracle in everything. Every moment Christ is rising. He is rising indeed.