

Over three decades ago I attended Texas Tech. One of my college jobs was working as an orderly at Lubbock General Hospital, now known as UMC. As an orderly, I spent my time moving people and things from place to place in the hospital. I would take patients to their rooms when they checked in, and to their cars when they were discharged. I would take blood samples to the lab, and drugs from the basement pharmacy up to the floors. I would rush women in labor from the emergency room to the delivery room. But one of the saddest parts of my job was when I had to take bodies down to the morgue.

A few minutes or hours before, the body I was transporting had belonged to someone's son, or someone's mother, or someone's friend. Their heart had been beating. Their skin had been warm to the touch. But after death, the shell, the remains of that person were no longer warm. The muscles were starting to stiffen. The color in their skin was gone. The very cells of the body were starting to digest themselves, to break down chemically, to decompose. The doctors and nurses of Lubbock General Hospital could do nothing more. All that was left to do was to take the body to the morgue, and keep it in cold storage until the funeral director could come to take the body and perform the final tasks to prepare it for cremation or burial.

Yes, I always tried to do this grim task with the utmost respect, since that body had belonged to someone's son, or someone's mother, or someone's friend. And yet, I was also aware that the body wasn't that of my friend, or my loved one. The body was that of a stranger. In spite of my sadness, I could remain somewhat detached.

That's what makes the beginning of our Gospel reading so sad. Luke tells us that a group of women, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, go to Jesus' tomb on Sunday morning.

These women don't have any sense of distance or detachment to ease their pain. They loved Jesus too well for any of that. He had been their teacher and their friend and their master. The prospect of anointing his dead body, the prospect of seeing him for the last time must have been quite sad indeed.

These women go to the tomb to deal with death face to face. Jesus' death was real. It was as real as the iron of the nails, as real as the wood of the cross, as real the stone of the tomb. They had seen him bleed; they had seen him die; and they had seen him buried.

Jesus died late Friday, and there was barely had time to get his body into the tomb before the sun went down and the sabbath began. The burial was a rushed job. They didn't have time to anoint the body with oil and spices. They couldn't go on Saturday, the day of the sabbath. So they go at their first opportunity, early on Sunday morning.

They go to the tomb to deal with the decaying corpse of a loved one. They go to perform the final rites for the dead in their culture, before allowing the flesh of Jesus' body to rot off its bones.

But things at the tomb are not what they expect them to be. As so often happens, God does something surprising. God acts in a way that we humans don't anticipate. The women go to the tomb expecting death and decay. Instead they find something else.

When the women get to the tomb, they find that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance. And to make things even more confusing, when they go in, they don't see a body. Things are not as they expected. Things are not as they should be. The tomb should have been shut. The body they placed in the tomb Friday evening should have been there Sunday morning. The women are bewildered.

But then, something even more unusual happens. Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes are standing there beside them. But 'dazzling' is not a strong enough word. The word Luke uses is the word for lightning. The two men appear in clothes that gleam like lightning. Their appearance is not only startling, but shimmering and radiant as well. And the women fall to the ground terrified.

And as if their gleaming appearance isn't startling enough, the two messengers deliver an even more startling message, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Jesus is not here. He is risen."

That Easter proclamation is startling. Why are you looking for a corpse? What are you doing looking in a cemetery? That's the wrong place. Jesus Christ is alive, Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead.

The women had thought that things were finished. They had thought that things were over and done with. These women who followed Jesus in life had come to pay final tribute to his dead body.

And the men who followed Jesus wouldn't even do that much. The men were hiding out. They were trying to keep out of the way of the authorities. But then, something changed all of their lives.

The Good News of Easter broke into their lives. The Resurrection changed their outlook completely.

In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God does something completely new. God does something unexpected. In place of death is life. Death does not have the final say. God breaks into space and God breaks into time in the Resurrection. And it changes forever the way that these disciples will think about life.

On Easter morning, these disciples are hiding in fear for their lives. But, in a matter of weeks, they will become bold Apostles. They will proclaim the Good News of the Resurrection of Jesus, and they will not be afraid to suffer death as they bear that message, for they know that death no longer has ultimate power.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart and core and center of the Christian faith. It wasn't springtime and flowers that made these women go back and tell the disciples that Jesus was alive. It wasn't warm fuzzy feelings about love being stronger than death that turned the cowering disciples into bold apostles within a 50 day period. It was the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that changed their lives. It was their encounter with the living Christ that gave their lives new meaning.

If you are looking for Jesus in a 2,000 year old tomb, you're looking in the wrong place. That's the message the angels give the women: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Jesus is not here. He is risen."

Because of that Good News, we don't need to travel to Jerusalem to meet Jesus. We don't need to build a time machine. Instead, he is knowable here and now. Jesus Christ is knowable today, in March of 2016. He is alive. His Spirit is present with us.

He can be known through scripture. He can be known in prayer. He can be known in the faces of the people around us. And he can be known in the sacrament of the breaking of the bread.

Today, along with Christians everywhere, along with all the members of Christ's body around the globe, we join together to give thanks to God for the gift of Resurrection. The sadness and grimness of death is not the end. The coldness of the grave is not our final destination.

On Easter, Death is defeated.
On Easter, the cross stands empty.
On Easter, the tomb stands empty.

But the hearts of Christians around the world are full: full of joy, full of love, full of praise.

Death has been swallowed up in victory.
Christ is risen from the dead.

Thanks be to God, who allows us to share in that victory.
Thanks be to God, who allows us share in the new and resurrected life of Jesus Christ
our Lord.