

When You Can't Find Words (Matthew 28:1-10)

Well, it's starting. You probably don't feel the pressure, but I do.

You can go about your life without ever having to think about it.

You assume **somebody** takes care of it, but, to be honest, you're glad it's not **your** responsibility.

But I don't have that luxury. I **have** to think about it.

You can sleep soundly in your bed, thrashing in the middle of the night with all the "what ifs"

Not me, my friend. **I'm** the guy they pay to have anxiety this time of year. A lot of people are convinced they could do my job without too much trouble. Wouldn't even break a sweat.

But when it gets to be **this** time of year, nobody comes up to me and says, "Man, I wish I had **your** job!"

I used to be like that. What a great gig! Getting paid to read and write, teach, share in people's lives?

Um, yes, please!

Fine. I'll admit it. It **is** pretty great. But if you think doing my job is easy, well, then I'd invite you to step up during **this** season.

You try grading exams and final papers for students with stage four-level Spring Fever warring with the sometimes crushing expectations of well-meaning parents and friends.

That's what I thought.

Teaching at a university is all fun and games until one of the Volvo-driving/tweed suit-wearing tyrants pulls out a red pen.

I have a confession. I don't like grading. Do. Not. Like. It.

One of my grad school professors told a bunch of us Teaching Assistants who were whining about grading tests and papers once: "Nobody ever got into teaching because they liked grading."

And we all knitted our brows and nodded sagely. "Man, that's the truth."

No, the other reason exam time can be so tough is that no matter how explicit I am about my students making sure to turn everything in by a specified time and date, there are always a couple of things I have to track down. "Don't turn it in late," I'll say. "I'm cracking down this semester."

As my wife would say, "Mmm-hmm."

"No, I mean it this time."

"Mmm-hmm."

I'm something of a pushover. I have colleagues who have no qualms about failing students—with very little pretext. But I don't want to flunk anyone because I don't have their papers—because maybe it **was** my fault; maybe they turned them in, and I lost them.

One time, I had a student who was getting an A- in the class, but I still hadn't received her final essay. So, I emailed her a couple of times to see where it was. No response. So, I started to get a little anxious because I needed to turn in grades, but I didn't want to punish this young woman, who'd been an excellent student all semester long.

So, I decided to email her one more time. About an hour later, just as I was getting ready to submit grades, with my finger hovering over the submit button, thus failing this student, I got a fevered email with the essay attached.

Now, let me be honest with you; I wasn't too optimistic that she'd have an excuse that I would find acceptable, one that would excuse her of having made me feel frantic about failing her, as well as making the whole rest of the class wait for their grades. I've heard just about every excuse you can imagine.

But, by this point, you know, in for a penny, in for a pound. So, I opened her email. It was exceedingly apologetic. She wanted me to know how sorry she was for missing the deadline.

Yeah, yeah. Heard it before. I braced myself for the excuse. Flat tire. A funeral for a dear beloved hamster named Kevin. An elderly friend of the family in Des Moines suffering from a particularly debilitating case of lumbago, requiring an unexpected road trip. I've heard just about everything.

She said, "Dear Dr. Penwell, I know this is late. I apologize. I've had it done for a couple of days now. Unfortunately, I was at my stepfather's house this weekend. He barricaded us in the house

during a stand-off with the police that lasted through the night. He doesn't have Wi-Fi, and I was stuck there and couldn't submit my essay to you. I'm so sorry."

Do you want to know what I said to her—hard-nosed jerk that I am?

"Ok. You win. I have no words."

Sometimes there **are** no words, right? I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. **Some** things are so amazing or so outrageous or so maddening that you just can't find the words to wrap around them. S

Getting married. Crushing it in the interview. Sipping coffee at a sidewalk cafe in Rome. Dropping a bowling ball on your big toe. Witnessing an act of selflessness by someone who doesn't know anyone else is looking. Being talked into eating raw oysters by people who **say** they're your friends. Seeing a young woman find

her voice in a world that tells her she'll never be good enough.
The smell of hyacinth and verbena in the spring. The taste of
peach ice cream in August. The sound of your child's voice when
the police finally put her on the phone after explaining that
there's been an accident. The feeling of laughing until your
stomach hurts. Watching a child being brought into the world.
Holding the hand of someone on their journey out of this world.

Hearing about state legislatures crashing through guardrails,
Thelma-and-Louisa-ing it off moral cliffs while focusing their
considerable energies on persecuting drag queens and
transgender kids. Or hearing about judges and other politicians
trying to convince the world they know more about pregnant
bodies than the FDA, obstetricians, or the people who have been
or who could potentially yet **be** pregnant.

Sometimes there just aren't words because the world is too
wonderful and too horrible, too beautiful and too ugly, too funny

and too sad. Words just don't seem to work. And so you say nothing.

But there are other times when the **reason** that you say nothing has more to do with the fact that you understand words aren't enough—that something **more** is required of you—that if you try to get by with words, you'll have completely missed the point. Sometimes words get in the way of doing what you know you have to do.

When the kids were really young, I remember some great injustice had been perpetrated. I don't remember now what it was, but we told Samuel to make it right with his sister. So, he said, "I'm sorry."

Mary, still furious, crossed her arms, looked away, and said, "I don't **want** your sorries."

Sometimes, we know, don't we? I mean, words aren't enough.

Sometimes words are a way of deflecting—of distracting us from doing the very thing that the situation calls for—of doing whatever's necessary to make things right.

So, I was thinking about words as I was preparing for this sermon. Easter Sunday. Holiest day in the Christian year, right? If you're going to deal with Jesus on Easter, you'd better grab hold of some good words.

But the thing that jumped up and kind of smacked me in the face as I was thinking about all this big stuff was the empty tomb. What words can we find that'll do that one justice, right? Empty tomb—it was supposed to be occupied.

I mean, in Matthew, when the women arrive, the stone's still blocking the door. Then, boom! An earthquake. An angel shows up, rolls back the stone—and lo and behold, nothing there. No Jesus. No body. No nothing.

What do you say to that? How're you going to explain that one down at the pub after work?

The empty tomb. That looms pretty large in Christian symbolism, doesn't it? Somebody starts talking about the cross, and you can be pretty sure that the empty tomb isn't far behind.

And why not? The empty tomb stands as a kind of placeholder for the more abstract concept of resurrection. You say, "empty tomb," and what else is there, really?

Lot of attention on that one, isn't there? Resurrection. The empty tomb. Christianity has a lot **riding** on those things.

But then I got to thinking, "You know, all the trumpets, and the flowers, and the loud exclamations of the victory over death, and the up-from-the-grave-he-arose stuff is pretty flashy. But there's

still the empty tomb—which, everything else aside for a moment—still just kind of sits there, doesn't it? Empty, I mean.”

I know we use the empty tomb as a symbol—but our symbol may be doing more work than we know. We look at the empty tomb, and it's easy to think that all the critical work has already been done.

God tapped Jesus on the shoulder on Easter Sunday morning a couple thousand years ago, and bam! Jesus is up making plans to go to Applebees for Easter dinner. Everything's changed.

Jesus rose. His followers still breathe a sigh of relief. We sing the songs, smell the flowers, and think, “I wonder if the ham will be finished cooking by the time the grandkids show up for dinner and start rubbing their chocolate-covered hands all over the new white sofa in the living room.”

It's nice. Easter gets draped in bunnies and pastels. Because ... the empty tomb.

But, you see, that may be a bit too easy. The way Easter **often** gets celebrated, it's maybe **too** effortless to think that the "empty" is the **work**. That the missing body is the **point**.

But the empty tomb is just that—empty. It doesn't mean **anything** if Jesus isn't out there on the road, ready to meet the two Marys as they hurry to Galilee to do what's been asked of them.

If the two Marys stay pondering the empty tomb, trying to work out theories of the atonement, they'll never get outside and hear the voice of God in the voice of the one they meet on the road—which is so often where God shows up ... out on the road, while we're headed to do the work that's been given us.

The resurrection is central, of course. But when we **say** that, we have to know that we're also saying that Jesus didn't stick around and make a shrine out of the empty tomb.

He didn't stick around to bask in the glory of his victory. Instead, he shuffled out of his jammies and got to work.

In Matthew's Gospel, the men don't even show **up** at the tomb.

It's the women. (Isn't it always the women who show up?)

Matthew doesn't record any words that they might have said.

They **had** no words. But I suspect that's because sometimes, rather than talk, the thing that needs to be done is to go, to seek, to do.

When they found out what had happened, the women didn't pitch a tent and say, "Empty tomb! That's all we were looking for, and that's all we need. We should stick around here and maybe invite people to come in and inhabit this sacred space. We can have coffee and donuts in the vestibule and put people in charge of

dusting the big stone out front that we've since made into a monument. I mean, look around. There's plenty of room for parking."

No. The moment the women see the emptiness, they start looking for explanations. Once they see Jesus is gone and they get the low down, they don't waste time talking. They get gone.

But before they get too far into the journey, they run right into Jesus.

But notice where Jesus is; he's **outside**. The women don't find him until they go outside and start down the road **away** from the empty tomb.

The emphasis in Matthew's Gospel seems less to be on what **happened** than on what happened **next**. That's why Matthew has Mary Magdalene and the other Mary burning up the road, not

sitting around talking about it, having meetings whose whole purpose, it seems, is to schedule other meetings.

What work does the resurrection achieve?

Victory over death. Freedom from fear. Salvation from sin.

However you want to talk about it. But the real question to us is, "Now that you've got this shiny new resurrection, what're you going to do with it? Are you going to hang out with it, set up a shrine to it and serve lattes, thinking all the work was done two thousand years ago? Or are you going to realize that the freedom the resurrection brings is the freedom to back out of the tomb, walk down the road, and get back to work?"

You see, it's not that the resurrection isn't cause for celebration; it's that we've misunderstood celebration. It's too easy to think that it means release from duty, a time to set down our work and head to the party. But the story of the gospel is that resurrection

doesn't **free** us from labor; it offers us labor worth giving our **lives** for. We find our greatest joy, our greatest expression of celebration, in the work we're entrusted to do.

What work is that?

Why, it's a continuation of the work that Jesus himself did—healing the sick, feeding the hungry, setting free the captives—remembering the forgotten.

Remember three chapters ago, Jesus tells the parable about the sheep and the goats? Remember that one? Lives that are true to the vision of God's new reign are lives that find a way to give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, lives that welcome the stranger, lives that clothe the naked and care for the sick, lives that visit the imprisoned.

What do all those things have in common? By and large, you can't accomplish **any** of them in the tomb. You have to back out through the door, walk down the road, and get back to work.

It doesn't mean the empty tomb's not important. You remember it; you love it, but you see it as a place from which you're sent out into the world—because that's where the sick, and the hungry, and the stranger, and the imprisoned **are**. That's where the work is. And that's where **Jesus** is.

You want to know what Easter's all about?

I don't have words sufficient to describe it. So the most loving thing I can tell you is that you're going to have to get to work to find out.

—Amen.