

## THE BIG EMPTY

### Genesis 49: 29 – 50: 3, I Thessalonians 4:13 – 18

The county sheriff was looking to hire a deputy and started the interview process with the least likely candidate. “Can you tell me what’s one and one?” The applicant answered, “Eleven.” It wasn’t what the sheriff meant, of course, but the job seeker was right in a sense. The sheriff then asked, “What two days of the week start with the letter ‘T’?... “Today and tomorrow.” The sheriff was again surprised, but what could he do? The man was right.

“Listen carefully to this one,” said the sheriff. “Who murdered Abraham Lincoln?” The applicant wracked his brain, but then admitted he didn’t know. “Well, you go home and work on it,” said the sheriff. The job seeker left the sheriff’s office and walked down to the café where a friend asked how the interview went. “Great! First day on the job, not only do I already have a case, but they’re letting me work remotely from home.”

When it comes to gaps in our knowledge, it is good to fill them with what we need to know. We can do the research and find out that Tuesday and Thursday also begin with T. That one and one add up to two. Find out what John Wilkes Boothe did. We can deal with emptiness of head by filling in the gaps of our knowledge, but it doesn’t work that way with the emptiness created by the death of a loved one. As you know, an emptiness in

one's heart is different from an emptiness in one's head. And this is our concern today.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed. His death has occasioned a terrible emptiness inside. Three days earlier, when he was crucified, each of these women lost out on a life in which Jesus in person played a big part. They had sat at his feet listening to his teachings, witnessed his healings, interacted with him along the road. But with the crucifixion, the joy of being in his presence came to an end. The world they had imagined crumbled.

In their grief, the three want to show their love for Jesus by washing his body and anointing it with perfumes for burial, as was the custom. But when they get to the tomb, the body is gone, and a strange young man gives them instructions. It's a scary experience which both amazes and terrifies them. Still, as they soon enough find out, Jesus's body was not stolen, as some folks claimed. "But in fact," comments Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."

Resurrection, which was God overruling the Sanhedrin's verdict of crucifixion, vindicated the truth of Jesus' message and the authenticity of his

life. The Sanhedrin, or ruling council, thought they had gotten rid of Jesus, only to have a higher court render a different verdict. “You can’t get rid of him! He’s the real deal.” One of the implications being that death cannot separate us from God or each other. As Paul says in our second scripture lesson “We do not want you to be uninformed brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.... Comfort one another with these words.”

Because of Jesus’ resurrection, the pain of a loved one’s death is lessened. Still there is pain. Paul does not urge us not to grieve. We’re not to grieve as do those who have no hope. We have hope, that of the resurrection. And how can we not grieve? Did we not spend wonderful times with the deceased? Did this person not play an appreciated part in our life? Will we not miss him/her? Even though the resurrection gives us the hope of more, we still have to get through the day now. We still have the rest of our God-given life to live. And how we begin is by grieving well, which involves not turning away from or trying to fill the emptiness inside with something else.

A movie came out some years ago called *Valkyrie*. This film is based on the true story of how German Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, played by

Tom Cruse, led an unsuccessful attempt during WWII to assassinate Adolph Hitler and bring the war to an end. Stauffenberg's plot was found out and he was executed. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's name came up in the investigation, and he was executed by the Nazis for helping Jews escape persecution. Bonhoeffer is to this day regarded by us Presbyterians as a top tier theologian, and I read from one of his writings regularly at funerals or memorial services because one of his concerns as a pastor had to do with the empty place in one's heart caused by the death of a loved one.

He said, "Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through." He continues, "That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation. God does not fill the space, the emptiness inside, but keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our relationship to the deceased, even at the cost of pain."

Years ago, a man got mad at me because in reading these words from Pastor Bonhoeffer, he thought I was saying that if your spouse dies, you should never remarry. No, that's not the deal. We're talking about grieving an individual. Should one choose to remarry, one's first spouse will still remain an empty place in one's heart. Should a child's parent die and the other parent remarry, the biological parent will remain an empty space in the

child's heart even if the stepparent is a wonderful person. Life goes on, and as it does, we can accumulate lots of empty spaces inside.

Think of how many valued people one loses through the years – parents, relatives, spouses, children, friends, neighbors, mentors, teachers, and so on. An emptiness for each of these people leaves us with hearts comparable to a slice of Swiss cheese, but that's okay. For which had you rather do? Value these people or forget all about them? Appreciate their contribution to your life, or cover it up with spiritual scar tissue?

The emptiness inside keeps us connected, keeps the relationship alive. I myself can go for periods of time not thinking about a beloved deceased person in my life, but then all of a sudden, he/she is there again, the memories gushing up through the emptiness. It's as though the emptiness in one's heart allows the memories to gush up. And at that point I thank God that this person was part of my life, although some of these memories can still bring a lump to my throat. Even after many years, the loss of a loved one can still be painful, but it becomes more manageable over time.

And the Christian writer Frederich Beuchner agreed. He said about the death of his father, "How they do live on these giants of our lives, these who have influenced us much, and how well they manage to take even death in their stride because although death can put an end to them right enough, it

can never put an end to our relationship with them. Wherever and however they may come to life again, it is beyond a doubt that they live still in us... Who knows what “the communion of saints’ means,” he asks, “but surely it means more than just that we are all of us haunted by ghosts because they are not ghosts , these people we have known, not just echoes of voices that have ceased to speak, but saints in the sense that through them something of the power and richness of life itself not only has touched us, but continues to touch us.” I find his definition of a saint very helpful. A saint is one through whom something of the power and richness of life itself not only has touched us but continues to touch us.

To grieve well involves a willingness to accept the emptiness inside, an emptiness by which the deceased continues to live with us. Some people try to fill the emptiness with busyness in an attempt to avoid the pain, or self-medicate, but this is rarely helpful. We need to grieve, and after a death, funerals or memorial services are historically important for officially doing so. Persons die. Their loved ones have a service. It’s been this way since long before the ritual held for Jacob in our first scripture lesson. It took 40 days to embalm him, then the Egyptians and Hebrews mourned 70 days more. Reading a head in Genesis, then a caravan took him from Egypt to Canaan, where his family mourned for yet another seven prior to his

entombment in a cave. That's different from nowadays, isn't it? Maybe you saw one of French's Mortuary's commercials on TV. In one, the son asks his mom whether she wants to be buried or cremated. She says, "Oh, don't make a fuss over me. Just stick me out in the backyard between Floppy and Mr. Meow." In another, the daughter asks her mom at the dinner table what to do whenever the time comes. The mom says, "Just put my ashes in a coffee can. Pass the salt, please." In the next scene, the daughter is dressed in black in the coffee aisle at the supermarket asking a clerk which of the many cans available to her she should put her mom's ashes in. She needs help in deciding. Her mom didn't even drink coffee. She drank tea."

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Increasingly people do say that they don't want a funeral or a memorial service, but the service isn't for this person: it's for friends and family, for the community to which the deceased belonged. Funerals and memorial services are for the benefit of those who have a need to give thanks to God for the life of the deceased, to officially begin grieving the loss, and to embrace the emptiness. And sometimes we would agree that the departed is a saint, one through whom something of the power and richness of life itself not only has touched us but continues to touch us. Amen