

Easter Day
April 16, 2017
Matthew 28:1-10

Lyle McKee
St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Bloomington, Indiana

Hidden Revelation (Redemption in Negative Space)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

For many years, I wondered what people were talking about when they discussed “negative space.” I heard things like “If you have trouble drawing something, draw the negative space.” I honestly wondered whether they were on drugs or if perhaps they were talking about another dimension or had been immersed in too much science fiction.

It took me longer than it should have to figure out that they were talking about the empty spaces and shapes formed by solid objects or drawings or graphics—like the triangle formed by my arm, [*demonstrate*]

My wife, Marie, has a painting created by an artist friend of hers in the Chicago area. In a work called “My Father’s Garden” the artist creates the illusion that a vegetable garden is surrounded by a fence without painting anything of the fence itself except the vertical posts. What is painted are all the bits and pieces of vegetation that can be seen through the fencing. The resulting diamond-shaped spaces on the white canvas suggest to the mind that there is indeed a chain-link fence guarding the produce. It is a rather amazing thing.

This artistic device is something I have now learned to look for. It is common on logos for various companies, usually in a way that enhances the message being conveyed.

Comment on a few logos. Then:

Polar bear caption: You never notice what’s all around until it isn’t there.

This idea of negative space and hidden messages strikes me as a special part of the story of Easter morning. The women come to the tomb where the body of their Lord had been placed and discover that it is empty, not to mention the angel seated on the stone now rolled away.

An empty tomb. Negative space. Hidden revelation. There is profound truth here that is suggested by an absence. Where there was a body, now there is none. It is quintessential Easter.

Even my barber made a suggestion that helped to set me on this path for the

sermon today. During my recent haircut, he offered the idea after we talked about the pastoral challenges of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. His father was a pastor, and he is acutely aware of such things. I was telling him that several of my midweek sermons, related to the Small Catechism, used quotes by Martin Luther from a letter he wrote to his barber. We both thought that was pretty cool.

Then he offered the idea for this Easter sermon that I get some balloons, blow them up, and write bible verses on them in a color close to the color of the balloons. He suggested that I then pass them around the sanctuary with a small flick, starting what folks would easily consider to be a contest to see how long they might be kept from hitting the floor.

After letting this go on for a time, Jeff said that I should collect them, read off the bible verses—and they passages they note, with the comment: “See how easy it is to miss a message from God.”

Not a bad idea, but I thought it would be a bit chaotic.

The point is well taken. We easily miss the message if we aren’t looking—whether it’s because we can’t see the hidden revelation in the negative spaces or because we misinterpret the nature of the game and fail to notice the more subtle ways that God tries to get our attention.

That is very much the problem of Easter. It’s what isn’t there, or what is there so subtly that we fail to notice it. An empty tomb.

You never notice what’s all around until it isn’t there. Sometimes meaning is discovered in what it not there. Sometimes the message is subtle or hidden and hard to see.

I ran across an article that offers an example. It’s called “‘Bay Leaf: The Flavor You’ll Notice If It’s There, and If It Isn’t” [Bonnie S. Benwick, (Washington Post, 10/8/2014)] Here are a couple of relevant paragraphs:

Ask a home cook, and he or she might say a bay leaf is added for flavor, or as an aromatic. Others say, sure, they toss a bay leaf in when a recipe calls for it, but they can’t tell you why. The leaves have been described as “earthy,” “floral,” “minty,” “like cinnamon spice,” “subtle” and “assertive.”...

“Taste two plain tomato sauces side by side, one of them cooked with a bay leaf or two,” says Laurie Harrsen, McCormick’s director of consumer communications. “The difference it makes is amazing. It’s a ‘foundational’ flavor, a workhorse—not the star.”

Science fiction author James P. Hogan observed: “We’re so saturated with

propaganda every way you look that we don't notice it. But when it isn't there, you notice."

Novelist Jonathan Safran Foer makes a somewhat more profound observation: "This is love, she thought, isn't it? When you notice someone's absence and hate that absence more than anything? More, even, than you love his presence?"

Even in the absence of freedom, hope may be discerned. Listen to the words of Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

It is inspiring to know that such things are possible. Even imprisoned, we may choose to exercise our humanity--to live out of our God-given and holy humanity, a humanity that we believe is a part of God through the incarnation and a humanity that embraces the life that follows death—ritualized in baptism and made manifest in the resurrection of our Lord.

Even at a tomb, we may perceive that the absence of life invites deeper living. There is something of this in the tradition of wakes and of fellowship meals that follow funerals. An awareness of death leads to an awareness and appreciation for life, and compassion for others.

A sorrowing woman approached a great sage with the plea that he bring back to life her only son, who had just died. The sage told her that he could indeed comply with her request on one condition: she must bring him a mustard seed from a home that was entirely free from sadness.

The woman set out to accomplish what appeared to be a relatively simple task. But years went by and she didn't return. One day the sage accidentally ran into the woman but hardly recognized her, she looked so radiant. He asked her why she had never returned to him.

"I went in search of the seed, as you asked. But I went into homes so burdened with trouble and sorrow that I could not just walk out. Who better than I could understand how heavy was the burden these people were bearing? Who better than I could offer them the support they needed? So I stayed in each home as long as I could be of service. The honest truth is that I never again thought of returning."

The point is not to avoid or defy death, but to see its invitation to deeper living—to resurrection—to live, in this case, with acceptance and with empathy for others, which may lead to peace in this life, and peace when our own life draws to a close.

Meaning expands as age increases. Revelation comes often in absence. I nearly titled this sermon “revelation in negative space.” That seemed a bit too high-sounding. And yet, it speaks to the empty tomb.

We see in that empty space a revelation of hope beyond hope, life beyond life—a revelation of God’s intentions for us.

- That we live life free of the fear of death, having died with Christ in baptismal waters and having risen with Christ to new life.
- That we live abundantly—not in terms of possessions or wherewithal, but in living as Jesus lived—with compassion, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, grace, justice, and peace.
- That we may live wholly human lives (w-h-o-l-l-y and h-o-l-y), respecting the dignity and agency of every other human life, seeking to encourage and equip all others to live equally full lives.
- That putting death in the rearview mirror, we may move forward in faith and charity to embrace all living things.
- That we be aware of the holiness of all that God has made and redeemed this day, offering resurrected life. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!