The Empty Tomb is Not the Story

Rev. Neil Parker, Vienna Community Church, Easter 2020

# Time to make a movie

Okay, all you budding movie directors out there, I’m talking to you. You know who you are … when you read a book, you make little notes to yourself about how you would direct that scene if you were making a movie. Your criteria for a good book is, “I would totally go and see this movie when it comes out!” Don’t let others shame you. You are in good company; there are as many of you as there are opera singers in the showers of the world.

So, I want you to imagine … if you were making a movie about this scene, how would you frame it? Would you focus on the action, the running back and forth, the sense of joyous confusion? That would involve some action scenes, perhaps even stunt people. Then a few closeups of the faces of your main actors as they show excitement and joy.

Or, perhaps, you would want to suggest the confusion of this day. It started out quite reasonabiy, quite ordinary, in fact. There is nothing more ordinary than the requirements of caregiving, whether it is for the chronically ill, or the dying, or even the dead. We may have offloaded a lot of the details in our contemporary culture to the professionals who “undertake” the details, but there is still lots to do and to decide. If you’ve buried a parent … or, God bless you, a child or a sibling … you know what I’m talking about.

Perhaps then you’d film with a handheld camera. Lots of closeups. Focus on the faces, yes, but showing the real effects of grief. Grief, in this case, mingled with confusion – if Jesus has dead (as he certainly was), then where is the body? How can we get on with grief when things are so undecided? This would be a gripping melodrama as your lead actors deal with the conflict of grief postponed.

Or perhaps you’d want a documentary. You want to set out the truth; Jesus, who was condemned to death, clearly has not been limited by death. Enough with the trials and the accusations and even the awfulness of the crucifixion; none of that has been enough to prevent the Lord of Life from returning from the dead. Your camera angles will focus on the impossibility of the tomb being empty without divine intervention; the size of the rock that has been rolled away, the presence of guards, the certainty that Jesus was dead when entombed, not simply fainted. You want a movie that will convince.

Or you want to create an inspirational movie. So many of our best-loved movies want us to believe in the power of something. It may be the power of following your dream, or overcoming all obstacles to find your true love, or the power of teamwork to win the championship. You might want to create that movie that doesn’t try to persuade, but seeks to inspire its viewers to feel the thrill. The thrill that convinces us deep down that truth is not a matter of dry fact, but an encounter with a reality that makes sense of our experience in the world and that gives hope for the future. Lord knows, we will always be in need of those movies.

Perhaps you don’t want to make a move that tries too hard. This could be a romance …. Jesus, loved by his disciples, men and women, is temporarily gone, but returns. Even if foretold, it wasn’t quite expected. You might make a movie that reminds us not to give up, not to lose hope, to believe that what is good will survive, no matter what.

What I don’t want is for you to create a science fiction movie. It’s tempting, of course. The Jedi Force (or whatever) that bursts the tomb open with a flash of neon-green light, countless angels descending like an alien invading force, scientific devices that allow for bodies to be transported or transmogrified or revived with mysterious chemicals or radiation. Let’s just move past those “scientific” explanations – they are not helpful, or necessary.

# If I were making a movie, I think I’d make a silent Charlie Chaplin-era silent movie. Let me explain.

The temptation with a movie is to try to explain too much, to make things too literal. Instead of leaving some openness for interpretation to the viewer, a movie locks images into our minds. The lead character now looks like this, instead of this. [Have you ever gone to a movie and been disappointed that the lead actor, no matter how well casted, looks *nothing* like you had imagined her/him to be when you read the book? If you’ve had that experience, then you know what I mean].

So, I’d go for the simplest possible format. Black and white, first of all. Second, no sound. No stirring soundtracks, no dialogue, no emotional pauses. Just action.

(How much of this is influenced by the fact that I have been trying to create online resources for worship that focus on music clips and videos and audio clips is something I will leave to your imagination).

Because … look at this action! It starts in darkness, with a lone figure heading to the tomb. But … something dramatic has happened! The stone that covers the tomb (zoom in to show how heavy and large and immovable it is) has been removed. Then the scene bursts into action; she runs to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. They run, too … an actual footrace, each one jostling the other along a narrow path. One arrives, then stops. The other muscles his way past him, and stops. Pan the camera to show … nothing. Just some cloths. Then there is that moment, almost a letdown, when they simply return home. End of story.

But not the end of the story. Because after all that activity, that frantic panic, that (masculine, musclebound) competitive desire to be a witness to something, the disciples are done. They leave Mary, weeping, by the tomb.

If I were filming, I would draw out this last scene. Because it is full of grief, and loss. Jesus is gone and lost, twice now. Once to death, and once to grave robbers. It’s too much to bear. And even in my silent movie, you would feel the grief and the loss. Because you’ve been there. You’ve lost things, you’ve lost people, you’ve lost hope before. You may not want to remember, but you can’t forget. You don’t need a soundtrack to make that any more real.

And then, this tender scene, so easily translated to the screen. The uncertainty about who is speaking to her, the sudden recognition, the desire to be close, the required distancing, the sense of hope that rises and rises and rises because there can be no question. “The Lord is risen! I have seen the Lord! Hallelujah!”

Right there, we could end with a great story of things that were expected to be one way, turning out to be much better than expected. Right there, we could have a story that would speak to our current fears about health and illness and economy and distancing and selfishness and racism and disaster. Despair does not have the last word. Death, certainly, does not have the last word.

# But that’s not even the end of the story.

Because the empty tomb doesn’t really convince anybody. It is not the empty tomb that convinces, but the lives that are filled with the presence of Jesus that provide the best evidence of resurrection. When we say that Jesus Chris is risen, we do not mean that he “has risen”, one day, long ago, part of a history to be studied and memorized. We mean that Jesus is risen still, is present still, is alive still, and is with his followers still. Even when we are off-track. Even when we get busy with other things. Even when we are filled with doubts about ourselves and our God. Even when we lose faith in our fellow Christian sisters and brothers. Even when we find it difficult to hold on to hope, and more difficult still to love the unlovely people around us. Even so … we are called to follow Jesus, and Jesus is very much with us, now and always.

It’s not a movie. It’s our real life.

Thanks be to God.