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Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed*

That's better. And it should be . . . because this is a rather special day in the life of the church. So many of us come out on a morning like today . . . and there are almost as many reasons for being here as there are people.

- For some, maybe it's a force of habit.
- Maybe somebody invited you or you're visiting parents or children.
- Maybe you're here to keep peace in your family or possibly to find peace for yourself.
- Maybe you feel compelled to celebrate the start of a new season or want to seek newness in your own life.
- \*\*\*\*Or it could be that everything else is closed on Easter morning . . . so why not try church.

In the end, though, it doesn't matter what got us here – all that matters is that we're here . . . and that we're here because it's Easter.

I know that for some that this is a strange and rare annual adventure into the world of religion . . . and that's all right. Because if there is one good day to get in touch with your faith, there couldn't be a better time than the celebration of Easter – and know that you're always welcome. And for those church regulars who get a little bothered that their routine's been upset . . . that the hours of worship have been changed, that it's hard to find a seat, that they had to park down on main street . . . fear not, your parking spot and seat will be back again next week. And anyhow . . . this *IS* what Easter's all about. (David Rue)

A grand and wonderful celebration of the risen Christ . . . and that we are a people of the empty tomb.

Story has it, that a woman at Princeton Seminary was in the school's cafeteria, when she noticed that one of the cooks had propped up a sign on a big bowl of beautiful shining apples that said:

*Take only one. Jesus is watching you!*

Farther down the lunch line, there was a large plate of freshly baked, steaming hot chocolate chip cookies. One of the other students had placed a hastily written sign over it that said:

*Take as many cookies as you want. Jesus is busy watching the apples!*

I tell that story because it reminds me that we so often try to capture Jesus, use him to do our bidding . . . watch over my apples, protect my turf . . . and in so doing, push him back into the tomb and seal up God. Well . . . if Easter says anything – and it says a lot – it says that Jesus is freed from the tomb to act and be God fully. No longer is Jesus restricted by the ways of

the world . . . by what seems reasonable, practical, or even by the possible. And Easter says that with him . . . we too are freed from the confining ways of the tomb. Easter says the stone has been forever pushed away . . . and that we've been freed to newness of life.

As a child I spent most of my summers on the northern shores of Lake Michigan. And like most little boys I loved to dig. I'd take a shovel whose handle came up to my shoulders. And I'd dig around streams that led into the lake . . . reroute them. I'd dam them up and create ponds that finally over flowed. But more than anything else – I'd dig holes. I'd dig deep holes down on the beach. I'd dig holes four and five feet deep.

I loved those holes. But my father didn't. Every time he saw one of my holes he'd tell me I better fill it in. *Somebody might fall in it and break a leg*, he'd say. *If you don't fill it in, when the waves come up they'll erode the dunes and ruin the beach. . . . If you don't fill it in, you just never know what will happen!* That's what he'd say. And in saying it, he proved that he didn't get it. That was the whole purpose of digging a great big hole . . . *you just never knew what would happen to it*. But he wanted it filled in, cleaned up, controlled.

I wonder how often we do that with God? How often do we put God back into the tomb? Stuff him back inside and shove a big stone in front of the door . . . because it feels safer, more predictable and controlled. I wonder how often we limit God to our puny imaginations instead of letting God be God . . . out of our boxed-in realities and alive? Isn't that what the scribes and Pharisees and the powers-that-be in first-century-Palestine tried to do? Jesus challenged them to let God out of the box they had constructed around him in their legalisms that dumbed God down. *They* had made God a finite limited petty little being just like them. Jesus said no. He said God's not done. God's still had so much more light and truth to shine upon the world, as John Robinson would say many years later. They tried to seal God in a darkened tomb. But the gospel writers are clear: God wouldn't be contained. The story wasn't and isn't done. The tomb is empty . . . Christ is risen.

Just a few decades ago, Popular Mechanics Magazine prophesied that, as they put it: *Computers may one day weigh only one and a half tons*. Tell that to your I-Pod Nano or your Blackberry. Limited by what they knew about computers, the writers failed to consider what might yet be.

The story of the empty tomb tells us that God isn't finished yet. The telling of the resurrection is the story that tells us God is *never* finished with us. There will always be more light to be shined upon us.

I think it's a part of the human gene to try to suppress and nail down God . . . to fill in the hole so there won't be any surprises . . . to push God back into the tomb where we can keep a close eye on him. But God just won't be kept within those walls. God *always* has the last word.

Back in 1917, when all religious activity was banned in Russia, a man by the name of Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin took part in the Bolshevik Revolution. He became a powerful leader of the Russian Communist party. There's a story of a time in the 1930's when he went to Kiev

and spoke to large crowd assailing them with every insult, argument and proof he could muster against Christianity. His assault on Christianity went on for the better part of an hour. When he was done, he looked out on what appeared to be the smoldering ashes of the people's faith. "Are there any question?" he demanded. A deafening silence filled the auditorium until one man finally approached the lectern. He looked out over the crowd to his left and to his right. Finally he shouted out the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: *Christ is Risen!* En masse, the crowd arose as one and the response thundered back: *HE IS RISEN INDEED!*

Sixty years later, in 1990, Amiee and I were in what was still then known as Leningrad. As we toured the city, it was jolting to see the churches and, mosques and synagogues that under the rule of Lenin and beyond had been destroyed or converted into civic buildings. Ancient cathedral facades transformed into swimming pools, gymnasiums and libraries.

For over seventy years the Christian faith had been banned. But it wasn't the faith that died. It was the Soviet Empire that crumbled. Much of the Russian will & spirit had died in those years . . . but the resurrection faith remained alive and well. The church buildings may have been taken away, but the true church, the Easter people went under ground and kept it burning. The faith would not be put into a tomb to die. It was the babushkas, the old grandmothers who kept it alive. They told the children . . . who told their children's children. They knew what was taking place on the streets wasn't reality at all. And they passed on the hope that something new was still happening in their midst. That God was and is still alive, risen, and acting in their lives.

Easter declares a new world. Easter says that by the resurrection, our hope-less world has become hope filled. Easter says that we are no longer bound by the grave. Easter says we are no longer slaves to the powers of death . . . that we are freed from the tomb. [R. Hollerith]

Think big this Easter. Think of the possible this Easter. Think of the empty tomb where life no longer is held in shackles . . . where we are indeed free to be the people we were intended to be. I think of those holes I used to dig in the sand . . . holes so very empty that they were filled with endless possibility. That's what Easter says . . . it says no matter our past, the slate is wiped clean . . . the hole is empty and filled with possibility. Easter says . . . the Lord is risen. Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*