



First United Church of Oak Park

Event Horizons and Empty Tombs

I Corinthians 15, selected verses

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“Light can’t escape a black hole, so seeing what’s inside of one is impossible. Getting a picture of a black hole’s edge is difficult, and getting a clear picture is something else entirely.”¹

Ten days ago, scientists reported that they have come a bit closer to penetrating the mystery of black holes. These collapsed stars, which represent almost unimaginable power and energy, are ubiquitous in outer space; there are more of them than astronomers can number. As humans, we know enough about them to speculate about them in pop culture, and we identify them as a challenge to scientific knowledge, a challenge that we pursue energetically. But we are a really long way from knowing everything about black holes that there is to know. The knowledge we lack far outweighs the knowledge we have.

As we come to another Easter morning, we might well, as believers, say the same thing about the resurrection. The knowledge we lack far outweighs the knowledge we have. We think of the resurrection as an event of almost unimaginable power and energy, and for 2000 years we have tried to figure out what really happened that morning when Mary Magdalene and the other women went to the tomb. No matter how hard we’ve tried, and no matter how well-developed the brains that try to figure it out, our efforts have come up short; there is much about this event that remains a mystery.

The oldest stories we have in the Christian tradition are the stories of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We have told and rehearsed those stories all week long: How Jesus rode into Jerusalem in triumph, and the people proclaimed him as king and messiah. Just a few days later he shared a Passover meal with his friends, where he broke bread and drank wine and spoke to them of his life and death. Later that night he was arrested by the Romans, and his friends scattered because they were afraid to be associated with him. They watched from a distance the next day as he was crucified on the edge of town, in a garbage dump, alongside two thieves whose names we do not know. It was an undignified way to die. It was a cruel way to die. It was a terrifying way to die. The Romans did not take rebellion lightly; they used gruesome execution methods like crucifixion to keep people in line. Jesus died that gruesome death. Later that day, Jesus’ friends buried his dead body in a borrowed tomb.

We know nothing from the stories about how his friends, family, and followers spent Friday night and Saturday, but we can imagine, because many of us have been through the routine of a death of someone we love. We know the grief, the numbness, the prayers. We know the way stories are told and remembered, with both laughter and tears. We also know that for some of us it helps to be busy in the wake of a death, and that is what we see the women doing first thing Sunday morning.

¹Joanna Klein and Dennis Overbye, “So What in the Universe Are Black Holes? Glad You Asked,” *The New York Times*, 11 April 2019, National Edition, A15.

Very early in the morning, as first light was breaking, the women made their way to the tomb. They brought along spices for anointing Jesus' body, as was their custom. They had probably done this before, so they knew the drill. But nothing in their past or in the stories they had told one another prepared them for what they found: Jesus was gone. The stone was rolled away. The tomb was empty.

They were frightened and confused. They didn't know what to make of it. Neither did Peter, who was quite skeptical about the women's story. It was a mystery.

Human perception and understanding cannot enter the mystery of a black hole. Einstein speculated that black holes are a point at which space and time come to an end. Matter comes to an end. To go into a black hole is to enter a "one-way portal to eternity."²

Like so many things in life, scientists can't understand black holes by coming straight at them; they have to go at them sideways. Sort of like Emily Dickenson talked about truth, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant –"³ scientists go at black holes at an angle. For the first time, they have been able to capture the image of an event horizon, the perimeter of the opening of a black hole.

Did you read about how they did it? Over 200 scientists collaborated on this project. They set up eight radio observatories on six mountains in four continents, and, according to *The New York Times*, the combined effect was the creation of a radio telescope as big as the earth. Two years ago, for 10 days all the parts of this massive telescope were trained on a black hole that is about 5,000 light years away from us. And when they compiled all the data, they got a picture of its rim, its edge, its portal.⁴ They got that picture by going at it slant.

That's how we see the resurrection, or what we can perceive of it; we see parts of it slant, from different angles.⁵ Like Jesus' intimate followers who come to the tomb early on Easter morning, we see its edges. We see a stone rolled away. We see men in dazzling white robes and we hear them tell us an incredible story. We see the linen cloths tossed aside and an empty spot where his body is supposed to be. But we do not see the thing itself – that moment when space and time and matter come to an end, and a body once dead is resurrected, never to die again. We don't see that. We see only its edges, and we see its effects.

Scientists know about the effects of black holes. Scientists can record and interpret the radio noise, gamma ray bursts, and sound waves that a black hole emits. A couple of years ago, they discovered evidence that two black holes collided in space, something they say that "sent a shiver through the fabric of space-time."⁶ The most interesting thing I read is that scientists discovered that black holes sing; they make music; their song is a Bflat, sung 57 octaves below middle C.⁷

²Dennis Overbye, "Peering Into Light's Graveyard: The First Image of a Black Hole," *The New York Times*, 11 April 2019, National Edition, A1.

³<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263>

⁴Overbye.

⁵Frederick Buechner makes this point in his wonderful Easter sermon, "The End is Life," in *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966), 79-80.

⁶Overbye.

⁷Dennis and Overbye.

The resurrection has effects, too. We have the New Testament because Jesus' followers experienced the effect of the resurrection, and they told each other about it, they taught their children about it, and eventually they wrote down and canonized the stories – stories about how Jesus appeared as a resurrected body in the days and weeks after his crucifixion. Jesus came to the disciples when they were hiding in the upper room. He cooked breakfast for them on the beach. He walked with them from town to town and joined them for supper. He lived. He was dead no longer. He lived.

What we celebrate today is that somehow on that first Easter morning, God in the person of Jesus Christ walked through a one-way portal to eternity. God in Christ somehow bent the continuum of matter and space and time, and Jesus who was dead became alive.

We don't really have words for this mystery, perhaps because we do not fully understand its paradox or its grace or its truth. We fumble for words. We try to hint at the truth we glimpse with metaphors. But in the end our words and imaginations are not quite enough to explain the incredible mystery of the resurrection. All we can do is to talk about its effects, and the way it radiates in everyday life, in your life and mine.

God took on flesh in Jesus for the sake of people like you and me. "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest," said Jesus. Years ago a man named Karl Menninger, the founder of the Menninger Clinic system which fosters mental health, told a preacher after worship that he envied the preacher. The preacher was surprised, because he knew Menninger and his accomplishments, and he wondered, "Why would you envy me?" Menninger told him, "All the people who sit in your pews are wounded in some way, and, every time you preach you have an opportunity to offer healing to each one of them."⁸

My own personal experience of sitting in pews and listening to sermons and remembering the varieties of my own woundedness convince me that Menninger was right.

I do not know what your particular griefs, or sorrows, or woundedness are. Perhaps you suffer from an illness, or you are just plain getting old and things don't work as well as they used to. Perhaps there are stresses and strains at home. Maybe you're in financial difficulty, or you have a job that sucks joy out of you. Maybe you are on the brink of a new adventure and you are scared about it. Perhaps you have lost someone dear to you and the emptiness is almost unbearable. I do not know the particulars. But I do know that every single one of us here this morning, including me, carries some sort of woundedness, and every single one of us longs for the healing and hope that Christ Jesus offers.

I read that when gasses get sucked into a black hole, energy just squirts out its sides.⁹ The resurrection is no different, though we could probably phrase it more elegantly. Energy and power just squirt out. The force of the resurrection cannot be repressed. The determination of God to redeem your life and mine is fierce and unstoppable. God loved this world and its people so much that God took on flesh in Jesus; he was born and he lived and died and lived again so that each one of us might taste and see God's goodness, God's devotion. Nothing can separate us from God's love for us in Christ.

⁸Personal encounter told to me by Elam Davies, the former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. These are not exact quotes, just the gist of the exchange, which occurred toward the end of Menninger's career.

⁹Overbye.

Christ is risen. Christ is alive. The government, with all its legal and military force cannot keep him in the grave. Christ is risen. Religious authorities with all their pious rectitude cannot constrain him. Christ is risen. The human bumbling and fear that the disciples displayed again and again cannot divert him. Christ is risen. The church's ineptitude and its fading influence in our society cannot change this truth. Christ is risen. Not even death can stop him. Death has been swallowed up in victory. Christ is risen. Christ is alive in the world, and Christ is alive in your life and in mine. Thanks be to God.

Amen.