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Into *the* Empty Places

by Douglas Burton-Christie



*God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.*¹

IT IS GOOD FRIDAY. I have just passed through the security check of Los Angeles County Central Juvenile Hall. Inside, it feels barren and empty. Paint flakes off the walls. Barbed wire stretches overhead. Little tufts of grass push against the concrete. Somewhere in the distance a sparrow sings. Across the yard, I see a group of boys and girls dressed in bright orange uniforms. They are walking, hands clasped firmly behind their backs, eyes straight ahead. Guards monitor their movements carefully. They are on their way to the chapel. My friend Mike, a Jesuit priest who has invited me here today, looks at his watch and mutters to himself—we are late. Hurrying on, we slip in the side door and enter the sacristy just as the kids begin filing into the chapel for the Good Friday service.

They move to their seats quietly, exchanging glances with one another, looking occasionally in my direction. I look at them too, trying not to stare. But I find it almost impossible to take my eyes off of them. They are beautiful. That is my first and strongest impression of these kids. I also feel angry, confused. Sitting here before me are fourteen-, fifteen-, sixteen-year-old kids, full of life and energy. I think, *they should be with their families, in school, outside playing*. Instead they are here in this prison, their lives reduced to something poor and thin. What are they doing in this awful place? How did they end up here? I know that some of them have committed terrible acts of violence. Others have been arrested again and again for gang-related activities, for petty and not-so-petty crimes. That is why they wear orange, why they are, in the eyes of the county, “high-risk offenders.” But this is only part of the story. Looking at their faces just now, I see something else—their beauty, their innocence, their hunger. And, of course, their fragility.

I find it difficult to hold all of this together—so much degradation, so much beauty. It doesn’t make any sense. It feels like I have stumbled onto a deep and terrible rift in the world between

¹R. S. Thomas, “Via Negativa” in *Collected Poems, 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 1995), p. 220.

the way things are and the way things ought to be. I think of those strange, mysterious words of Jesus, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Was Jesus thinking about kids such as these when he uttered those words—kids who had been drawn into the rough life of the streets, kids without a home, separated from their families, living on the edge, on the verge of losing hope? It is not difficult to imagine it. Clearly, Jesus felt deep compassion for the children around him. Not only because of their innocence and purity, but because they were the most vulnerable. They had no standing in society. They were considered non-persons. How startled his disciples must have been when they tried to send the children away, only to be rebuked by Jesus: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matt. 19:14).² Then, even stronger words, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

Here in this place, I feel the sting of these words. "Change and become like children." Like *these* children, these castoffs, with few prospects, little reason for hope? Yes, apparently, it is these children who I am called to listen to today. They are to be my teachers, in their brokenness and their poverty.



I AM NOT SURE how I feel about this. Do I want to know what they have to teach me? Do I want to open myself to their suffering, learn from it, be changed by it? I say I do. But do I really? Every year as Good Friday approaches, I cringe. I think of how I might get through the day unscathed, as little changed as possible by the questions arising from the dark emptiness and affliction of the Cross. I am afraid to approach too close to this place.

I am ashamed of my fear. I should be able to face the Cross

²All scripture references are to the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

more squarely. But I cannot. I have to be drawn toward it obliquely, as I have been today. Even then, I cling to the hope that I can maintain a safe distance from this terrible emblem of agony, control it. This, after all, is not my suffering. I am not imprisoned. I am not facing twenty-five years to life. I am only here visiting. After a few hours I will walk back through the carefully guarded doors of this jail; return home to the embrace of my wife and daughter, and enter again into the comforting rhythms of my life. The events of this day gradually will take their place among a host of memories, more or less distinct, that live within me. Maybe I will be touched by something I see and hear in this place. Maybe my perspective on things will change. Perhaps I will be changed.

That is what I fear the most. To open myself to real change means relinquishing the comfort and safety I cherish and exposing myself to risk and insecurity. This, I know, is what genuine empathy and love require of me. It is what I long for most in my life. And yet it is precisely this that I fail at most. On those occasions when I feel myself tested, when I am brought face to face with the suffering of another human being, often I feel all too acutely the thin, insubstantial character of my empathy. It does not feel strong enough to sustain another soul struggling to survive a period of desolate loneliness or anguish—or strong enough to sustain me for that matter. I am aware in such moments of how deep is my inclination toward self-preservation and security. I can almost feel myself groping for solid ground beneath my feet, checking to be sure lest I find myself suddenly drawn out into deeper waters.

How little solace there is in that sure footing. What a poor place to build a life. I know this. I know that it is an illusion to imagine that I can find happiness by seeking always to situate myself in a safe place. Yet I do it constantly, all the while asking myself when I will find the courage to rid myself of this illusion, to cast myself out over the fathomless depths and acknowledge my vulnerability, my great need.

Maybe that is what I am doing here today. I knew when the invitation came that I would not be able to enter this place casually. This would be no mere visit. I would be changed by what I saw and experienced here, moved in a way I could not possibly move myself. I know well enough that I lack the courage to move myself. But I also know, or suspect, that I lack the ability to do so. Real, lasting change in my life always has arisen through grace,

tangible in the unexpected claim of another person upon me. Perhaps this is the real heart of the matter for me—I am afraid to give myself over to the risk of being claimed by another. I am afraid to admit the depth of my own poverty, my need. Nowhere is this more clear than in my relationship with God.

Here in this place, in the presence of these boys and girls, I feel my fear begin to dissipate—which is strange, for this place is suffused by fear. I can see it in their faces and hear it in their voices as they tell their stories—fear of the guards, fear of violence at the hands of other inmates, fear of long jail sentences stretching before them. Perhaps most of all, fear that their lives are over, that they will never recover all that they have squandered. I do not pretend to understand this, though I can feel it, like a fist in the stomach.

These kids are fearless, though, when it comes to admitting the depth of their vulnerability, their poverty. In the very place where I feel most constricted, they move most freely. Perhaps it is because so many of their illusions already have been shattered, especially the illusion of invulnerability. Most of these kids have been in gangs. Some still are. On the streets, they have known the sense of empowerment, the projection of power that belonging to a gang brings. Which is why, in a kind of parody of the Gospel injunction, they have left behind everything—mother, father, brother, sister, everything—for the gang's sake. Now that power is gone. So is almost everything else. Here they sit, naked and vulnerable and alone.

*Do
I want to
know what
they have
to teach
me?*



WHEN I WAS seventeen years old, I was arrested for something stupid I did with a car. No one was hurt. But I broke the law and the police caught up with me one day as I turned into the parking lot at school. My friends watched, mouths agape, as I was handcuffed and taken away in the police car. At the station, I was booked and fingerprinted,

then escorted to a tiny jail cell upstairs. The door slammed shut behind me and suddenly I was alone. It was only then that I realized how scared I was. I looked around. In the corner was a bare toilet. The stench of urine filled my nostrils. I felt sick. How could this have happened to me? How could I have ended up in jail? I did not yet know how much trouble I was in. But I knew it was serious.

That was over twenty-five years ago. What I remember most clearly about that moment is my deepening sense of shame and humiliation. Sitting in that cell, I went over and over in my mind what I had done, why I had done it. It was a strange experience to confront myself in that way; I was not really in the habit of doing so. But suddenly I had no choice. I squirmed under the realization that there really was no explanation that would account for my behavior, for what I was doing in jail. I had been careless and stupid. That was the simple truth. It cast a harsh glare on my soul that I found painful to take in just then. It also cast a revealing light on the rest of my life. I realized I was not the person I imagined myself to be. I certainly was not as mature or self-possessed as I thought I was. Nor was I really very capable or independent. In many ways I was still a child.

My mother arrived later that day to pay the bail and take me home. She was standing there waiting for me when I walked out of the jail. I remember how glad I was to see her.

*Real
change in
my life always
has arisen
through
grace*

But I also was embarrassed and ashamed. I had a hard time meeting her gaze—not that she said anything to me to indicate her dismay at what I had done. There were no lectures, no recriminations from her. She apparently sensed that I already had suffered enough humiliation. It *had* been humiliating to be stopped and questioned by the police, to realize there was a warrant out for my arrest, to be handcuffed in front of my friends, to feel the scorn and disgust of the police officers, to have to telephone my mother and tell her I had been arrested, to sit looking out through the bars of that jail cell. Riding home in the car with her that day it dug in even deeper; I felt deflated and vulnerable, lost.

How strong that feeling is within me, even after so many years. Today, as I look out at the faces of these boys and girls, it comes back to me in a rush, that knot in the pit of the stomach, that bewilderment at seeing my still-fragile child's sense of the world break apart. I am suddenly back there in that place

of failure and need and vulnerability, a place I have found myself moving through many times since then. It is a place I share with these kids.

Being here with them today helps me to see that. Not that I compare my suffering to theirs. I don't want to compare it at all. They have their own road to travel, and I have mine. But today, on Good Friday, we struggle together to enter into the empty places of our lives—those places of suffering and abandonment and bitter disappointment—and seek God there.



IT IS QUIET in the chapel. Everyone is settled, ready to proceed. Music plays softly in the background. Mike stands up and begins reading a prose poem he has prepared:

Today, I invite you to picture yourself in Jerusalem on top of a hill. The sky is dark. It is cold. There are three crosses. Jesus is hanging with a rope around his waist to keep him from falling. Blood drips from his body, which now hangs limp. Mary says, "It's over. I saw my son Jesus breathe his last breath. I saw so many hours of torture. Now he lays here without breath. Suddenly I understood what death is..."

A story of desolation, agony, abandonment, told from a mother's perspective. How awful the events of that day must have seemed to Jesus' mother. It is a story all too familiar to these kids, and to their mothers. The presence of their mothers can be felt in the room this afternoon. A question has surfaced: "How did my own mother feel when she saw me arrested, sentenced, and taken away to prison?" For a long while this question hangs in our midst, awaiting a response.

Then a young boy steps forward. His head is shaved. He has dark brown eyes and sharp, high cheekbones. He clearly is nervous, shifting back and forth from one foot to the other. But he wants to say something to the others gathered here. "I put my

mom through a lot of things. She was sad to lose her son. I always used to be around her. She used to be like my big sister. That's how we used to kick it. Everything has changed now." Suddenly, he stops talking. His eyes are filling with tears. "Man! I look at my mom's face on Sunday. . . I don't know, man. I'm starting to get heartbroken!" He beats his chest with his fist trying to catch his breath and searches the room as though looking for some kind of help. Finally, he gives up and sits down.

Another boy walks up to speak. He is tall and thin and has a gentle voice.

Since I turned thirteen, I put my mom through a lot of pain. . . Now I sit here facing prison time for something I got caught up in with my so-called home boys. I know the pain I put in my mom's heart. Now she wonders what went wrong, because from a little boy carrying books to school. . . I have ended up here. And now my mom looks at me in this place of hate where no human being wants to be.

A young girl comes to the front of the chapel. She is maybe sixteen years old. Her chestnut hair is pulled back in a tight bun on the top of her head. She has hazel eyes that flash as she describes a scene she has imagined many times since going to prison—her mother frantically searching the house for her. Today, her mother speaks through her:

Startled by my own dream I wake up covered in sweat. I toss and turn and try to fall asleep again. No, something is wrong. I saw my little girl caged up like an animal, no one to turn to, nowhere to escape. This is just a dream. It can't be true. So I get up out of my bed and walk toward her room. I reach for the door knob and a cold wind blows across my face. I whisper to myself, "It was just a dream, my baby's still here." As I walk in, a silence covers her room. Each step that I take closer to the bed, my heart begins to beat faster and my fears grow deeper. To my heartbreak, it is empty, bodiless! Tears begin to fall. My heart stops beating. This nightmare has become my reality. This pain that has been cast upon me is unbearable. I see the pain hidden in my lovely daughter's eyes. Days slowly pass. Let me take her place! Let me suffer instead of her. Your sweet scent still lingers through the room. I miss you so much. . . I carried you for so long. . .

Another boy walks forward. He is handsome, with dark brown hair cut short. His voice trembles as he speaks (later I learn that he has been charged with first-degree murder):

I can't describe the pain my mom feels. Her pain to me is like no other. The pain my dearest mom feels is the same pain that is killing me. I see my 'mom' go through some kind of agony. I can see it in her eyes even though she would never tell me. I see my mom break down in tears before me because of how difficult it is. That was then. Now it is even worse. Now that I got my life in someone else's hands, I see my mom has an even deeper sorrow. . . . I wish I could take away her misery, put happiness and joy back in her dreams. All I can see is her pain—that is killing me.

On and on it goes, this sounding of the empty places. For almost three hours the kids stream forward, crying out their loss, regret, sadness. Also, though in more modest measure, expressing hopes for a different kind of future. Then, in silence, they begin moving toward the cross: With endlessly different gestures—touching, caressing, kissing—they reverence it. Here in this place of abandonment and desolation, they linger.

Then it is over. The kids move from the chapel to the yard under close escort from the guards. It is time for the evening meal. They take their food from a large metal cart and sit at long tables to eat. There does not seem to be much talking tonight.

None of the rest of us has much to say either. On the way home in the car Mike and I try a couple of times to talk about what just happened, but we cannot manage it. We have just witnessed something immensely sad and beautiful. We know that it involves us somehow, that it touches on the very mystery of the crucifixion. But it is too difficult just yet to say anything about it. It is still too soon—I sense this even, as I write these words—to try to say what happened in this place.