

Empty Tombs

John 20-1-18

Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

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Some of you may remember back in 1986, there was a two hour T.V. Special hosted by Geraldo Rivera, where in front of 30 million viewers, they were going to open up the personal vault of Al Capone!

No one knew what was inside the vault, although some people speculated there would be a lot of money, gold, or jewelry and some people even thought there might be the remains of a body! For two whole hours on live television, Geraldo Rivera had us on the edge of our seats.

We all wanted to know "What was in Al Capone's safe?" But when the door to the safe were finally opened, there was nothing inside except for a pile of dirt and a few empty bottles. In other words, the safe was completely empty.

It was a bust. There was no cash. No gold. No jewelry. No weapons, no bones no secret documents. Al Capone's vault came up empty to the embarrassment of Geraldo Rivera. (Although ratings went through the roof!)

In our Bible passage for today, which comes from the gospel of John, the first person to go to the tomb of Jesus Christ wasn't going there to look for money loot or hidden treasures, she was going there to look for the body of Jesus Christ. But unlike Geraldo Rivera, when she discovered that the tomb was empty - she wasn't embarrassed but rather she was overjoyed! Because the "Treasure" that was once inside, would now be revealed to all!

John 20:1-18.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter, and the other disciple, started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw strips of linen lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.

Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize it was Jesus. "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking it was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" which means Teacher.

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

The Tomb Was "Empty"

There were no camera crews when Mary went to the tomb that morning. There was no TV talk show personality trying to "hype" up the event. Aside from the two sleepy guards who could barely keep their eyes open there was no one at the tomb when Mary Magdalene showed up,

In other versions of the story, it was more than just Mary Magdalene, some say Mary, the mother of Jesus, along with Mary the wife of Clopas, another Mary the mother of James and a woman named Salome, all went to the tomb very early on Sunday morning to prepare Jesus' body for a proper burial, but when the women arrived at the tomb - they found that the stone had already been rolled away, and that the tomb that once contained Jesus body - was now empty.

Well, if this happens to be the very first time that you are hearing the Easter Story, this wouldn't sound like good news, but I doubt that there is anyone here today who doesn't know the reason "why" the tomb was empty, it was empty because Jesus conquered sin and death and rose from the dead!

He is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!

You all know this (and I know this) but when the women in our story first arrived at the tomb, they didn't know what you and I know, in fact, they thought something was wrong.

The Tomb was Empty!

If you didn't know the full story of Easter, the phrase: "The tomb was empty" might not sound like good news.

For example, if you walked into your kitchen and opened up the refrigerator, and you said to yourself "the refrigerator is empty." Is that good news or bad news?

Or if you went to the bank to pull out some cash and the bank teller said to you: "Your bank account is empty." Is that good news or bad news?

Or if you tried to start your car this morning and it just wouldn't start because the gas tank was empty, is that good news or bad news?

Well, when the women went to the tomb early that Sunday morning to prepare Jesus' body for burial, when they found that "*the tomb was empty,*" at first they thought something was wrong - that something bad had happened, but what they thought was "bad news" turned out to be "good news!"

"The Tomb was Empty!"

That's the good news this morning! (part of it - at least.)

There's a story I once heard about a little boy named Phillip. Philip was a special little boy and was also mentally challenged.

Well, on the Sunday before Easter, Philip's Sunday School Teacher gave all the kids a plastic Easter egg and gave them the following assignment - they were supposed to find something that reminded them of new life, then put it

inside the plastic egg and bring it back with them when they came on Easter Sunday.

So Philip and the other kids took the Easter egg's home, along with the assignment and when they came back to church the following Sunday on Easter, they all placed their eggs in a big basket on a table.

The teacher then proceeded to open each egg one-by-one. The first Easter egg she opened contained a small flower to the delight of all the kids, so the teacher passed around the flower to let them all smell the fragrance.

The next egg she opened contained a long blade of grass, which she also passed around to let all the children touch.

Then the next egg she opened contained a plastic butterfly, which she explained was a really great example of new life, since butterflies start off as caterpillars - then go through a transformation.

Finally, there was one egg left in the basket which was the one Phillip had brought. When the teacher picked it up - it seemed rather light, and when she shook it - it didn't make any sound. All the kids were curious as to what could possibly be inside, but when the teacher opened it up, it was completely empty.

The other kids started laughing - thinking it was a prank. The teacher also thought that maybe Philip misunderstood the assignment. They were supposed to put something inside that reminded them of "new life" and that's when Philip stood up and said to the entire class: **"My Easter egg is empty, just like Jesus' tomb!"**

Philip understood the assignment - perhaps better than anyone else because an empty Easter egg, just like an empty tomb, reminds us of new life.

"The Tomb was Empty!"

When Mary arrived at the tomb on that very first Easter morning, and when she saw the stone had already been rolled away, she didn't know at first what to make of it all, and so what did she do? She ran back and told the other disciples, and then Peter and John ran back to the tomb to confirm her story.

Did you happen to pick up on the part where John kept referring to himself, as "the other disciple?" And did you also pick up on the part where he said - "he ran faster than Peter?"

Then the passage tells us that after Peter and John went back to their homes, Jesus revealed Himself to Mary and when Mary heard Jesus call out her name - she recognized His voice and then she responded with a familiar title: "*Rabboni!*" which indicated that she finally knew - it was Him!

The Tomb was empty because Jesus was not inside!
The Tomb was empty because Jesus was victorious!
The Tomb was empty because death could not contain Him!

What's the good news church? "The Tomb was Empty!"

"Now comes the good part!"

There's a story I heard about a family who was watching a movie that told the story of Jesus Christ, and in that family - there was a little 6 year old girl who was deeply moved by the movie's portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion and death.

As she watched the part where Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb, tears rolled down her face as the little girl started to cry.

But then after a moment, she broke into a great big smile and then she said to her parents: "**Now comes to good part!**"

Of course the little girl was referring to the **resurrection** of Jesus Christ!

Part of the Good News this morning is that the "Tomb was Empty!"
The other part of the Good News is that Jesus rose from the Grave!

Jesus, Himself, said:

*"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.
They will kill him, and on the third day, he will be raised to life."*

Well, three days later and on the 1st day of the week, when the women and disciples went to look for Jesus' body, not only was the tomb empty but Jesus had risen from the grave.

This is what we believe and this is what we confess!

We confess that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried,
but on the third day - He rose again from the dead!

HOPE.

So, what does all of this mean for us today?

Well, for starters, it means we are people of the resurrection!

John 3:16 says:

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that
whosoever shall believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

We are people of the resurrection!

And as people of the resurrection, one of the things that should be evident in our lives, is that we are people filled with hope.

This past year, I've never experienced anything like it before.

We've never seen anything like this that closed down our schools, our business and businesses, even closed down our church building.

We've never experienced any like this that has impacted our way of living, our way of interacting - even our way of worship, and for many people, this past year was overwhelming as if the world was coming to an end.

I'm sure you know a lot of people who have experienced loss this past year, but one thing as people of the resurrection - we never give up on hope!
Christian Hope!

This Pandemic may have changed the way we do things,
but it has not changed our faith.

This Pandemic may have changed the way we interact,
but it has not changed our witness.

We are people of the resurrection and people filled with hope!

I like the way Peter said it:

*"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone
who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."*

Well -our reason for hope is that the tomb was empty and that Jesus rose from the grave!

My first charge to you on this Easter Sunday
is to be people filled with hope!

JOY

The second thing that should be evident in our lives, is that as people of the resurrection, our lives should be filled with *joy!*

I've gone too long in this sermon without telling a corny joke yet, and since I we often have young people in our worship who love to hear jokes, let me share one of my favorite "knock knock" jokes!

"Knock knock."

(you're supposed to say "who's there?")

"Knock knock."

"who's there?"

"Jesus."

"Jesus who?"

"Jesus who???"

You mean to tell me you don't know who Jesus is?

You better start going to church!"

Christians should be filled with joy! We should be people who love to smile, and love to tell cheesy jokes (and when your pastor tells one - we should be people who love to laugh!)

Speaking of Knock knock jokes, you know it takes two people to tell a knock knock joke - the first person who pretends to knock and the second person, who pretends to answer the door.

Well, on Easter morning, you couldn't tell a "knock knock" joke and that's because when Mary knocked on the tomb, there was no one inside to answer the door!

Resurrection people should be filled with joy!
The resurrection story should "spark joy!"

When the two disciples Peter and John entered the empty tomb, they saw strips of linen lying there along with the burial cloth that was around Jesus head, carefully folded up and separated from the linen, and when they saw that the tomb was empty, they ran back to tell the others - the news of the resurrection!

And Mary, after encountering the risen Lord, she too ran back to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord!"

My second charge to you on this Easter Sunday morning is to be people filled with Joy!

Tell the story of the resurrection like the punch line of a great joke!
Tell the story of the empty tomb like an announcement for the ages!

LOVE

Lastly, Resurrection people should be filled with love!

The resurrection and an empty tomb
means that our lives should be full of Love!

Did you know that the very first conversation between Jesus and Peter, after the resurrection, didn't take place right there at the tomb but many days later and much farther away?

In fact, the first conversation between Jesus and Peter took place after breakfast on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias.

It was a famous conversation where Jesus asked Peter,
"Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

Then Jesus asked him again:

"Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

and then a third time Jesus asked Peter,

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

That's not how I imagined the first conversation would have gone between Jesus & the #1 disciple. I think the 1st question I would have asked, if I were Jesus was:

"Peter, why did you deny me? Why didn't you stick up for me?"

But that's not what Jesus asked. Instead, Jesus asked if he loved Him, and asked in such a graceful way, letting Peter know that he was forgiven, not just once, not just twice, but each time he denied Him.

This was the same person who asked Jesus earlier,

"How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me, 7 times?"

And Jesus replied:

"Not 7 times, but 77 times" which is like saying, "forever."

The empty tomb and the story of the resurrection not only shows the power of God, but the love of Jesus Christ who died for our forgiveness.

As people of the resurrection, we have the opportunity to demonstrate Christ's love and amazing grace.

Someone once said:

"Every act of love, every deed done in Christ and by the Spirit, every work of true creativity, doing justice, making peace, healing families, resisting temptation, seeking and winning true freedom, is an earthly event in a long history of things that implement Jesus' own resurrection and anticipates the final new creation, acting as signposts of hope, pointing back to the first [resurrection] and on to the second." (N. T. Wright)

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
We bear witness to an empty tomb and that Jesus rose from the grave.

May the Good News of Easter fill your lives with resurrection hope,
with everlasting joy and with immeasurable love!

(closing prayer)

Lord Jesus, you are the resurrection and the life. This day morning we gather to celebrate your victory over death, the atonement for our sins, and the restoration of a broken fellowship, with our God and Creator.

Because of the price you paid, things are back to the way they supposed to be, before sin entered the world, and pulled us far away from you.

We thank you for making all things new. We thank you for giving us a brand new start. For hope, for joy, for love, for faith, for a reason to give to others, for the hope that we have.

We now humbly ask, that as our church and campus is preparing and looking forward to a different kind of resurrection, that you would fill our campus once again with the sounds of new life and vibrancy.

That the zeal and excitement that the early church once experienced, we might be blessed with once again.

To re-establish a physical community; to re-engage with our neighbors, to be able to say, "come and see," "come and belong" to the spiritual community here at St. Mark's.

This we pray in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.