

An Empty Tomb—Now What?

John 20:1-18

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Christmas and Easter are two big days—maybe the biggest—for Christians. They even spill over into the culture, the world around us. Though Christmas gets more attention. I can remember as a kid discovering that some of my friends got presents on Easter. In our family it was Easter eggs after church. Now, those friends didn't get the kind or the quantity of presents they got at Christmas. One writer compares Christmas and Easter this way:

Christmas has a large and colorful cast of characters including not only the three principals themselves, but the angel Gabriel, the innkeeper, the shepherds, the heavenly host, the three Wise Men, Herod, the star of Bethlehem, and even the animals kneeling in the straw. In one form or another we have seen them represented so often that we would recognize them anywhere. We know about the birth in all its detail as well as we know about the births of ourselves or our children, maybe more so. The manger is as familiar as home. We have made a major production of it, and as minor attractions we have added the carols, the tree, the presents, the cards. Santa Claus, Ebenezer Scrooge, and so on. With Easter it is entirely different.

The Gospels are far from clear as to just what happened. It began in the dark. The stone had been rolled aside. ...Mary Magdalene seems to have gotten there before anybody else. There was a man she thought at first was the gardener. ...There was the sound of people running, of voices. ...Confusion was everywhere. ...

It is not a major production at all, and the minor attractions we have created around it—the bunnies and baskets and bonnets, the dyed eggs—have so little to do with what it's all about that they neither add much nor subtract much. It's not really even much of a story when you come right down to it, and that is of course the power of it. It doesn't have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of truth. ...

The symbol of Easter is an empty tomb. You can't depict or domesticate emptiness. You can't make it into pageants and string it with lights. It doesn't move people to give presents to each other or sing old songs. ...

He rose. ...If it's true, there is nothing left to say. If it is not true, there is nothing left to say. For believers and unbelievers both, life has never been the same again. For some, neither has death. What is left now is the emptiness. There are those who, like Mary Magdalene, will never stop searching it till they find his face.

(www.frederickbuechner.com/content/easter, accessed 3/25/14)

After Jesus was crucified and he died, some friends took his body and placed it in a tomb. The tomb was a cave with a low entrance and several shelves or niches where bodies could be placed. A large stone was rolled in front of the entrance.

On the third day after his death, some of Jesus' friends discover that the tomb is empty. An empty tomb—now what? What does it mean? What are we supposed to do now?

Early on that first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried on Friday. All four Gospels mention Mary as one of the first to find the empty tomb. The other three include other women with her, but John focuses on Mary. She had followed Jesus from Galilee and was present when he died and when he was buried.

She comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been moved from the entrance. Assuming that someone had broken in and stolen Jesus' body, she runs to find Simon Peter and another disciple. This other disciple is called "the one Jesus loved" which seems to designate the apostle John, son of Zebedee. Mary tells them that someone has taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, "and we don't know where they have put him!"

This story is realistic. It doesn't seem to have been made up. In that time, if you were making up a story like this, you wouldn't have a woman be the first witness. Women's testimony wasn't even acceptable in a Jewish court. Also, notice that Mary and the others don't immediately think that

Jesus had risen from the dead. Instead, they make the natural assumption that someone stole his body.

Peter and John take off to see the tomb. John outruns Peter and gets there first. He stoops over and looks through the entrance. He sees the linen burial cloths lying there, but he doesn't go in. When Peter arrives, true to form, he barges right into the tomb. He sees the linen wrappings lying there. He also sees the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. It's rolled up by itself, apart from the wrappings. This cloth was about the size of a small towel and was probably wrapped around the chin and tied at the top of the head to keep the dead man's mouth from falling open.

While Peter looks at all this, John also goes in. *He sees and believes.* What did John see? What did he believe? First, he saw that the tomb was empty. Jesus' body was not there. Then he saw how the burial wrappings were arranged. He realizes that Jesus' body had not been stolen. What grave robber would take the time to unwrap the body and neatly fold up the cloth? This sounds like an eyewitness account.

What did John believe? Though his faith was not fully formed, he was beginning to realize that Jesus was alive. Perhaps he thought that Jesus had already returned to the Father as he had said he would. Maybe other things that Jesus had said that didn't make sense at the time were beginning to come clear. Like when waking up from a dream, John is about to grasp the truth but his thoughts are still sluggish. He hasn't yet made the connections. He and Peter still don't realize that the Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), rightly understood, pointed to Jesus' resurrection. John has the beginnings of resurrection faith, but he has not yet seen the Lord. The risen Jesus for him was still an absent Jesus. He simply saw that Jesus was not in the tomb (J. Ramsey Michaels, *John: Good News Commentary*).

John's belief is not perfect, not complete, but it's there. In John's Gospel, "to believe" means to trust, to rely on, and "to be open to change and commitment" (José Míguez Bonino and Néstor Oscar Míguez, *That You May Believe* 85). He opens himself to something new. Maybe he doesn't fully know what's happened. But he's ready to accept the new challenge of an empty tomb and he discovers a new commitment to life.

Peter and John return to their homes not because what they saw had no effect. Instead they figure there's nothing more to be done, nothing to be solved at the empty tomb. They're leaving behind the old way of death. They don't know yet what the new is, but they do know they won't find it by remaining chained to the past. What they return to—daily life and community—will be changed because the tomb was found empty (Bonino and Míguez 85).

The empty tomb by itself didn't produce faith. It indicated that something had happened. But the disciples still had to find out what did happen. That discovery and real faith came when they met the risen Lord. But the empty tomb supports their later proclamation that Jesus is alive. If the tomb had not been empty, or if Jesus' body could have been found somewhere else, the message that Jesus had risen indeed would never have gotten off the ground. So, while the empty tomb is not final proof of Jesus' resurrection, it is part of the resurrection's reality and it gives support to our faith that Jesus is alive.

We still have the question, Now what? Jesus who was dead is now alive. What does that mean? Where does that take us?

The resurrection of Jesus was something new and it leads into all kinds of new experiences, new life.

New creation comes from the resurrection. When Mary Magdalene first noticed Jesus outside the tomb, she thought he was the gardener. Given the transformation of his body and her tears of grief, it's understandable that she didn't recognize him at first. And, thinking he was the gardener was a natural assumption—the tomb was in a garden.

The story of humans in the Bible starts in a garden. God creates a man and a woman and places them in the garden. New creation starts in a garden as well. Jesus' resurrection happens in a garden. Jesus is the second Adam who restores what Adam and Eve lost (1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Romans 5:13-19). Even greater, Jesus is Adam's creator who breathes life into people (John 20:22).

Maybe Mary wasn't far off imagining Jesus to be a gardener. What does a gardener do? Tills soil, plants seeds, cultivates, pulls weeds, and gathers a harvest. Jesus breaks up the hard soil of our hearts, plants the

seeds of his word and kingdom in us. He cultivates and nurtures our lives. He pulls the weeds of selfishness, bitterness, pride and whatever else chokes out the word in us. He makes us bear kingdom fruit.

Jesus shows that God has not given up on creation. His incarnation, coming in the flesh, being fully human, shows the dignity and value of human life and the world God made. Jesus' death was real, physical. Through his death he redeems real people. Jesus' bodily resurrection affirms the goodness of creation and God's plan to keep working in it. God doesn't intend to snatch us out of physical reality but to redeem all of reality.

I read a great statement once that says, "The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole world" (Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God* 170, quoting a Roman Catholic Eucharistic prayer). It renewed the disciples. John came to new faith when he saw the empty tomb. He and the others would later receive new life when they met the risen Lord Jesus. They had new understanding. Jesus had promised to turn sorrow to joy (John 16:20). Mary experienced that as she wept at the tomb, then saw Jesus and heard him speak her name. Countless others have known the joy of the resurrection invading and transforming our sorrow.

New relationships come from the resurrection. Mary finally recognizes the stranger in the garden when he speaks her name. He knows her and now she knows him. Naturally, she wants to hug him. But he says, "Don't cling to me." The disciples' relationship with Jesus was changing. He would not be with them physically for much longer. They had to get used to relating to him through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells Mary, "Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Earlier, he told the disciples, "I no longer call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends..." (John 15:15). Now he calls them not only friends, but brothers and sisters. They have a new relationship with Jesus and so they have a new relationship with God. Followers of Jesus, believers in Jesus share in the relationship he has with God the Father.

Early in the Gospel of John it says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with

the Father, has made him known" (1:18). We enter into that relationship through faith: "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (1:12).

In this new relationship with God, we have a new purpose. *New mission comes from the resurrection.* There's excitement and urgency about the resurrection. Notice how much people run in this story. Mary runs to tell the other disciples about the empty tomb. Peter and John run to see it. In Luke's account, two disciples who meet the risen Jesus on the road run from Emmaus to Jerusalem with the news (24:33). Jesus tells Mary to go to the others with his message. She "went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her."

I love a story I heard about a young man who became a follower of Christ during his senior year in high school. As a fresh, eager Christian he went to hear Tony Campolo speak and was inspired. Campolo invited students to sign up for his program of inner-city ministry in Philadelphia that summer. So this young man did.

In mid-June he met about a hundred other kids at a church in Philadelphia. They sang for about an hour, then Tony Campolo arrived and preached for about an hour. By the time he was done, the kids were shouting, standing on pews and clapping. Campolo said, "O.K. gang, are you ready to go out there and tell 'em about Jesus?" And they all shouted, "Yeah, let's go!" He said, "Get on the bus." So they got on the bus, clapping and shouting and singing.

But then they were driving deeper into the city, into worse neighborhoods. They stopped singing and just stared out the windows. They were scared. The bus stopped in front of one of the worst looking housing projects in Philadelphia. Tony said, "All right, gang, go out there and tell them about Jesus. I'll be back at 5:00."

Hesitantly, the kids got off the bus. They stood on the corner and prayed. Then they spread out. This young man walked a ways and came to a huge tenement house. He gulped, said a prayer, and went inside. The smell was terrible. Windows were broken out. There were no lights in the hall. He walked up a flight of stairs and then down the hall toward a door

where he heard a baby crying. He knocked on the door. "Who is it?" said a loud voice inside. The door cracked open, and a woman holding a naked baby looked at him. "What do you want?" she demanded. He said, "I want to tell you about Jesus." She threw open the door and began cursing him. She cursed him all the way down the hall, down the stairs, and out to the sidewalk.

He felt terrible. He thought, "Some Christian I am. How in the world could somebody like me think I could tell people about Jesus?" He sat on the curb and cried. Then he looked up and noticed a store on the corner—windows boarded up, bars on the door. He went in and looked around. Then he remembered the baby had no diapers and the woman was smoking. So he bought a box of diapers and a pack of cigarettes.

He went back to the tenement house, said another prayer, walked back up to the apartment and knocked again. "Who is it?" growled the voice inside. When she opened the door, he slid the diapers and cigarettes in. She looked at them, looked at him, and said, "Come in." He stepped into the dingy apartment. She said, "Sit down." He sat down on the sofa and started playing with the baby. He put a diaper on the baby, though he had never put a diaper on a baby in his life. The woman offered him a cigarette. He had never smoked, but he took one and smoked it. He stayed there all afternoon, talking, playing with the baby, and listening to the woman. Finally, she asked, "What's a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?" He said, "I came to tell you about Jesus." And he told her everything he knew about Jesus. It took about five minutes. She said, "Pray for me and my baby, that we can make it out of here alive." So he prayed with her.

Later, back on the bus, Campolo asked, "Well, gang, did any of you get to tell 'em about Jesus?" And this young man said, "I not only got to tell them about Jesus. I met Jesus."

(www.sewickleyumc.org/blogs/index.php/pastorsheart/2010/04/28, accessed 4/23/11)

Have you seen the Lord—by faith? Do you know him? Are you being made new by the power and joy of his death and resurrection? Is there someone you could tell about him?