

Sermon File # 726

Scripture Text: John 20:1-18

Sermon Title: *The Empty Tomb: The Transforming Power of the Resurrection*

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The Empty Tomb: the Transforming Power of the Resurrection

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to John 20:1-18. On this Easter Sunday we come to John's account of the resurrection. The passion and cross of Jesus were the climax and theme to which Jesus' life was leading. In a real sense the chapters in all four gospels that precede the cross are introductions that prepare us for the cross, which was the primary reason for Jesus' incarnation. But without the Resurrection, the cross and death of Jesus would have been simply tragedy. They would have meant "the end of the trail," and the termination of a short-lived movement. George Eldon Ladd wrote that without the Resurrection of Jesus, redemption history would have ended in the cul-de-sac of a Palestinian grave (Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, page 143). What happened on Easter morning was the denouement of the drama of Jesus. As is true in a typical drama, the last scene shows the final outcome of the story as all the main characters appear on stage and the plot all comes together, and the results of all the actions and character development are fully revealed.

New Testament scholar NT Wright says that “John’s two Easter chapters rank with Romans 8, not to mention the key passages in the Corinthian correspondence, as among the most glorious pieces of writing on the resurrection” (page 662, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003). Our text in John’s account of the Resurrection focuses on the experiences of Mary Magdalene, John “the Beloved Disciple,” who was the evangelist who wrote this Fourth Gospel, and Simon Peter.

Follow as I read **John 20:1-18**.

The historical factuality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a persistent and formidable watershed that divides believers and unbelievers, whether inside or outside the church. There is no more verifiable historical fact, yet skeptics continue to concoct theories that evade the veracity of this key doctrine on which the church stands or falls.

Listen to a typical liberal position of theologian Marcus Borg, whose perspective is to deny that Jesus actually arose in a bodily resurrection:


“I now see Easter very differently. For me it is irrelevant whether or not the tomb was empty. Whether Easter involved something remarkable happening to the physical body of Jesus is irrelevant. My argument is not that we know the tomb was not empty or that nothing happened to his body, but simply that it doesn’t matter. The truth of Easter, as I see it, is not at stake in this issue” (quoted by Gary M Burge, page 571, *The NIV Application Commentary: John*).


To the contrary, it is vitally important what happened to the body of Jesus. As NT Wright and countless other scholars have shown, the fact of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus to the first disciples was one of the major turning points of history. As much and as often as Jesus told his disciples he would be crucified and raised again, they simply did not grasp what he was saying. Their understanding of a messiah was rooted in the Jewish expectation of a triumphant king who would overcome all other rulers, political and otherwise, and would immediately inaugurate his kingdom. There was no room for a crucified messiah in their thinking. Yes, they believed there would be resurrection in the messianic kingdom, but not that the messiah would suffer and die and be singularly raised from the dead. These truths that Jesus had taught them didn’t come together in their minds until after they had seen for themselves the stupendous evidence that Jesus had indeed been raised from the grave (See NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, above citation).


Borg and others throughout the ages have tried to explain the biblical accounts of the Resurrection as creations of overly zealous followers whose hopes were so strong that they jointly imagined Jesus was raised and then concocted the resurrection accounts to perpetrate the idea their leader was alive. All these theories fly in the face of biblical and historic evidence, such as the empty tomb, a missing body, the parallel accounts, and the transformation of the disciples. We could also mention the rise of Sunday, the


day of the resurrection, replacing the Sabbath as the new Lord's Day of worship, and the existence and expansion of the church through the millennia as convincing evidence. We can add to these the psychological fact that the followers of Jesus were in no frame of mind to concoct any theories or to launch a movement based on a fantasy that would cost many of them their lives. To them, their Lord was really alive.

Contemporary writer, John Updike, captures the convictions of these disciples in his poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter":


*Make no mistake: if He rose at all
 it was as His body;
 if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
 reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
 the Church will fall.*


*It was not as the flowers,
 each soft Spring recurrent;
 it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
 eyes of the eleven apostles;
 it was as His Flesh: ours.*


*The same hinged thumbs and toes,
 the same valved heart
 that — pierced — died, withered, paused, and then
 regathered out of enduring Might
 new strength to enclose.*


*Let us not mock God with metaphor,
 analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
 making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
 faded credulity of earlier ages:
 let us walk through the door.*

Today we examine the evidence of the empty tomb and what took place in the lives of Mary Magdalene, John the Beloved Disciple, and Simon Peter. I ask you to walk with me through the door, in the words of John Updike. But before we walk through the door of the tomb, let's consider the situation of the disciples before arriving at the tomb.

Before arriving at the tomb: the *despair* of the disciples (verses 1-4; 11-15).

One of the interesting and incredible theories to desperately explain away the reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus is the idea that the disciples were so hopeful that their Master was risen that they hallucinated and contrived stories based on their fantasies about the risen Lord. As NT Wright and others have

convincingly articulated, the disciples were in no such frame of mind. First, they, being what Wright deems “Second Temple Jews,” had difficulty believing in a crucified and individually risen Messiah. They believed in a future national resurrection when their political enemies would be overthrown (NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pages 685ff). To these first followers of Jesus, his death meant...

The loss of hope

When their Lord was arrested and crucified, the disciples had mostly forsaken him and, in Peter’s case, had denied him. Having failed to understand all of Jesus’ warnings, they simply were unprepared for what had happened to their Master. They were bewildered, frightened, and as Luke says about the disciples from Emmaus, their hopes were dashed by their Master’s death (Luke 24:21). They were so dejected and grief-stricken, they refused to believe the report of the women who found the tomb to be empty (Luke 24:22-23). The disciples were experiencing grief over the One to whom they had devoted themselves.

Mary Magdalene, as we see in our text, was particularly grief-stricken over the death of her Lord, to whom she had devoted her life. She, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons, was particularly grateful for all he had done for her and had become one of the group of women who helped to support the disciples (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2-3). Now that it appeared her Lord was dead, and perhaps his body stolen, what was she to do? Jesus had forgiven her, but how could she know her sins were taken away now that her Lord, who claimed to have the Father’s authority to forgive sins, was dead and gone?

And then there is Simon Peter, the one who championed Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). He had now denied his Lord three times, exactly as Jesus had predicted (John 18:15-27). His mind must have been swimming with confused thoughts about his Master’s claims as the great I Am, and now his death. John, the Beloved Disciple, as the evangelist who later was to compile our Fourth Gospel, had paid particular attention to Jesus’ claims, such as “He who has seen me has seen the Father,” and “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 14:9, 11:25). What was he to make of the situation at hand?

Grief is the sense of loss. And apart from faith, grief is the loss of hope. These disciples had pinned their hopes on Jesus. As far as they could tell, their Lord was dead and gone.

In his testimonial book that describes his grief pilgrimage upon the loss of his wife of short duration, CS Lewis wrote that the reality of Joy’s death “smashes my dreams to bits” (*A Grief Observed*). Death has a way of rendering absurd life’s heretofore meaning. Grief leaves one feeling weak and vulnerable in the face of something so redoubtable and monstrous as death. Lewis said his grief at first felt like fear, with the fluttering in the stomach. And his life seemed to be somewhat of an embarrassment to his friends, who never knew quite what to say in his presence.

So, imagine how these disciples felt—the fluttering in the stomach, the weak knees, and perhaps the embarrassment of dashed hopes, having forsaken everything to follow Jesus. The possibility of hope seemed the farthest thing from the minds of Mary, Peter, and John. Mary was so blinded by her tears she could not even see her Lord at first.

Paul, in his argument for the necessity of the bodily resurrection as part of the warp and woof of faith, posits the collapse of our faith and hope if there is no resurrection of the body that awaits the believer. If we will not be raised, he says, then Christ himself was not raised. And if Christ has not been raised, “our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Corinthians 15:14-19).

So, Paul suggests hypothetically that before we arrive at the tomb, and without the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are a hopeless, embarrassed and pitiable lot. But note...

The yearning for hope and the drawing of Christ (John 12:32)

But even in their despair, they were drawn to the tomb with perhaps a yearning. John’s Gospel account is artful, as well as reliable and first-hand. In chapter 12, Jesus, after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, predicts his death. His heart is troubled as he thinks about the approaching hour of his arrest, trial, and passion. He then reasserts his willingness to go to the cross and finish the work of his atoning death, and the Father speaks thunderous, assuring words. Then Jesus speaks and says that his cross will spell the defeat of “the prince of this world.” “But I,” says Jesus, “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” And John adds that he said this to show that he would die on a cross (John 12:27-33). The Father drew those at the foot of the cross to a recognition of the Son of God (Luke 23:47ff). The crucified Savior continued to draw people to himself, including these disciples who came to the tomb. The women disciples, who perhaps included Mary Magdalene, brought spices to the tomb as their last act of loving devotion (Luke 24:1). In any case, the lifting up of Christ continued to draw people to the discovery of faith.

And note that this drawing, just as the death itself, is one of total grace. Simon Peter, oblivious to Jesus’ warnings about his pending denials, nevertheless denied his Lord three times. Yet the grace of God drew Simon Peter, just as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had been drawn by grace to the body of Jesus, which they buried in recognition of his kingship (John 19:38-42).

And God was drawing his people to the crucified One that they might discover him as the risen Savior. Note with me...

At the tomb: the *discovery* of the disciples (verses 5-9; 16)

Mary Magdalene (along with other women disciples, as we see in Luke's account in Luke 24:1) made the initial discovery of the empty tomb, and ran and told Peter and John, who raced each other to the tomb. Their fear was the grave had been robbed, a serious crime, and an unlikely one, considering the care the Jewish officials had taken to secure the tomb. But what Peter and John discovered was, what James P Boice Called "the not-quite-so empty tomb" (volume 5, *John*).

The not-quite-empty tomb

John, the younger, outran the older and probably larger Simon Peter (Kent Hughes says about Peter, "A fullback is good for only 50 yards!" See *John: That You May Believe*, by Hughes). John stopped at the entrance to the tomb, but Peter, the impulsive and brazen, walked right in. They saw the astounding presence of the empty grave clothes. The strips of linen that had been wrapped around Jesus' body were lying as though they the body of Jesus, in the words of John Stott, had been vaporized. Peter and John were bewildered by this evidence, which meant something supernatural had to have happened. The cloths were like the chrysalis left by a butterfly. This was not unlike the way the risen Christ was to appear suddenly in the Upper Room, even though the door was shut and locked.

Earlier in his Gospel John told how Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave. He was brought back from four days of death by the life-giving word of Jesus. Yet he was not raised with a resurrection body, but was brought back from the dead to resume his mortal life. And so when Jesus called him forth from the grave, Lazarus struggled forth, with his body still wrapped with the grave cloths. So Jesus instructed the amazed onlookers to "Take off the grave clothes and let him go" (John 11:38-44). But, unlike Lazarus, the risen Lord simply abandoned/passed through the grave clothes without their needing to be unraveled, just as his body passed through a door without its having to be opened.

Notice with me the...

Stages of looking

There's an interesting and important study in the words John uses for his and Peter's looking into and within the tomb. John arrived first, and simply looked into the tomb "at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in" (verse 5). This was a look of initial surprise and consideration of the evidence. No doubt the idea that something amazing had taken place was in their minds. A lot of people will give the truth of the Gospel an initial thought and a cursory consideration. They, like John in verse 5, "look from the outside." Mary

Magdalene also had looked from the outside. When she came back to the tomb, she had begun to draw incorrect conclusions about the evidence of the empty tomb, and had concluded that Jesus' body had somehow been stolen. Like this initial glance of the disciples, many will investigate Jesus' life historically, but never go beyond a superficial understanding. And without a thorough look, wrong conclusions will be reached, such as Jesus' being merely a good man and teacher, but certainly not the risen Son of God and Savior of the world.

Besides this initial evidence of the empty tomb according to John, Peter and Mary, we have the entire record of all four gospels that tell about the empty tomb and the repeated appearances of the Lord Jesus that were sufficient to convince these skeptical disciples. In fact, as NT Wright argues convincingly in his scholarly work, the empty tomb, combined with the appearances of the risen Lord, were the necessary and sufficient evidence needed to transform the disciples, who were not expecting Jesus' resurrection. The Resurrection changed the disciples from defeated adherents to courageous and zealous witnesses in the midst of danger and hostility and unto death by martyrdom (Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*).

Now we today have the evidence of the complete canon of Scripture, which gives us the events of the resurrection, the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord. Scripture also tells us of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who encountered the risen and fully glorified Christ. We have Paul's and the other apostles' letters, and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, which are filled with the account of the burgeoning church, empowered by the risen Christ at work through the Holy Spirit. We have the added witness of 2,000 years of church history, and the encouragement of the witness of countless martyrs in these days when many are being persecuted yet are more than willing to die for their faith and for the sake of the gospel.

In verse 6 of our text we see that Simon Peter seemed to move toward a closer examination of the evidence, as he saw on close observation the grave clothes. Again, these strips of living had simply been vacated and not unraveled. Some here today may be close to faith. The evidence and revelation of Christ and his gospel is in your mind. It is convincing and you have no reason or case for refuting it. But as yet grace has not moved into your heart. In verse 8, we read that John went inside the tomb and "saw and believed." Grace was at work, and he accepted the evidence and within his heart he said "Yes!" to God. He knew Jesus was alive, and right then and there he trusted. It's interesting to note that "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead" (verse 9). Their minds could not yet harmonize this event with the Old Testament Scriptures, which they had read all their lives with the perspective of "Second Temples Jews" (NT Wright's term). But they had enough evidence to believe Jesus was alive.

Let this experience of Peter and John be a lesson of encouragement to you who are struggling with difficulties from your lack of understanding the Bible. All you really need to know is what John and Peter knew—Jesus died for us

and he lives. When you trust him and commit to follow him, grace has entered your life, and now you can grow in grace and the knowledge of your Lord and Savior. The other questions will in time be resolved. In this case, you don't understand in order to believe. You believe in order to understand. As New Testament scholar RVG Tasker said, John and Peter became the forerunners of those Jesus told doubting Thomas were blessed. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Hearing his voice

Mary's experience of faith in the risen Lord came, not from seeing the evidence, but by hearing the Word. Mary had returned to the empty tomb and the angels asked her why she was crying. When she answered that the body of her Lord had been robbed, she turned and saw Jesus. But she didn't recognize his appearance. Jesus' question, "Why are you crying?" seems to be a gentle rebuke. After her remark to Jesus, whom she supposed to be the gardener, Jesus spoke her name. She then turned to him, called the name, "Rabboni," which she evidently used often, and probably fell at his feet and grasped his ankles. Mary's faith was awakened when she heard the voice of the Good Shepherd, who had said his sheep would hear and follow. And when we too hear his voice calling us, we respond in faith and follow him as Lord and receive the gift of eternal life (John 10:27-28).

The birth of faith

Faith that saves is faith in the living, risen Lord Jesus. Of course, it's not just faith in faith that saves. We must have faith in a real and active God who saves. It's because there is a "God who is there, and who is not silent" (to use the late Frances Schaeffer's words) that we can have life and faith. And our trust is in the Son of God, who was incarnate and who died in our place, for our sins on the cross. And we believe he lives, and all this is told us in his Word, the Holy Bible, that contains objective, propositional truth. But we are not saved by giving assent to propositions. We are saved by placing our trust in the living Lord Jesus.

I recall in a seminary classroom, in a course in Pastoral Care, that one of the students was expressing his skepticism about the objective truth of the historical resurrection of Jesus. As I recall, this was a friend of mine named Tom, who had fallen under the influence of Rudolf Bultmann, the German scholar who set out to de-mythologize Scripture. And so, under the teaching of this scholar, according to Tom the historical Resurrection was jettisoned as mere myth and not as historic fact. I remember the reply of Professor Wayne Oates, who told this unbelieving student, "The Resurrection is something that has to happen to you." Of course, the Resurrection is a fact of history. And we must place our faith in a real Jesus who really died and rose again. Yet, grace is God's initiative that reaches us, and awakens us by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

Mary Magdalene, John the Beloved Disciple, and Simon Peter experienced something that day. You might say that the Resurrection happened to them.

So, they were not surprised when they saw the Lord Jesus that same Easter night. William Barclay defined a Christian as one who has seen the Lord (*John*, volume 2, Daily Study Bible Series). Believers have looked in faith and have experienced the power of the Resurrection, of Christ living within.

Leaving the tomb: the *devotion* of a disciple (verses 17 & 18)

Peter and John had left the tomb with their new-found but nascent faith that Jesus arose, but Mary Magdalene encountered the risen Lord outside his “not-quite empty tomb.” As we noted, her experience of recognizing the risen Lord came through his voice, which quickened her faith experience.

The transformation of a relationship

In the dramatic encounter of Mary with Jesus we see the transformation of her relationship with her Lord. She had been gratefully devoted to Jesus since she had experienced his delivering power. She was in the band of devoted women followers who cared for the disciples’ material needs (Luke 8:1-3). When she saw the risen Lord, her sorrow was turned to joy, just as Jesus had told his disciples would happen (John 16:20). Mary held onto Jesus as if to say, “I won’t let you be taken from me again!” But Jesus told her about the new way of relating.

Paul describes the new relationship of faith made possible by Jesus’ death and resurrection. He writes, “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer” (2 Corinthians 5:16). Jesus was introducing Mary to a new way of seeing and relating. Before the cross, the disciples knew Jesus in a mortal way, and were taught, comforted and strengthened by his physical presence. And, as much as Jesus had told them, they simply did not comprehend the necessity of his death or the fact of his resurrection. But now that Jesus’ atoning death was completed and he was alive in his resurrection body, there would be a transition in their relationship with him. Jesus explained to Mary Magdalene that he was still in the process of being lifted up from the cross (John 12:32). He was dwelling in the glory of heaven, even as he would continue to make periodic appearances to his disciples. Jesus was not saying to Mary that from now on they would relate less, but rather more. He had promised the Holy Spirit (especially in John 14-16), who would soon indwell every one of his followers. Instead of being with them only when physically present, he would be in them and with them all the time. And they would continue to grow in intimacy with and understanding of him in this transformed and transforming relationship.

In his first letter, John reflects on this transformed relationship. Looking back on the days he was with Jesus, he writes of this former experience:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life (1 John 1:1). And then John

writes that about the fellowship he now has with the Father and Son and its availability to all who will believe (1 John 1:2-4).

This abiding relationship with Jesus was not available in the days of Jesus' pre-resurrection flesh. In his earthly ministry, Jesus spoke of a new Kingdom relationship he was establishing, one that transcends the earthly. His family had come to "rescue" him from his zealous ministry, thinking that perhaps Jesus had "gone off the deep end." But Jesus then spoke of the new Family of God for all who do God's will (Mark 3:31-35). Now that Jesus is risen, God's people everywhere are bound together in this Kingdom Family. We relate to God as our Father, Jesus as our Elder Brother, and to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, who all are indwelt by the same Christ within us, the Holy Spirit. As Paul says, the risen Son is "the firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 8:29). And the writing preacher of Hebrews says, "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers" (Hebrews 2:11). Not only is Jesus unashamed to call us his brothers and sisters, he has made us his co-heirs. As we share in his sufferings now, we can expect to share in his heavenly glory (Romans 8:17).

As we will continue to note as we walk together through these final two chapters of John's Gospel, the risen Jesus was establishing this new way of relating to him. He gave his disciples, prior to his final ascension back into heaven, the relationship with him through the Holy Spirit. And he told them to wait in the Upper Room in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit would come upon them in a permanent and powerful way (Luke 24:49).

Taking on a new agenda

Jesus told Mary Magdalene about this new way of relating to him because of his ascending to the Father. And then he gave her an assignment that became representative of her life's assignment and Great Commission. Instead of her holding onto Jesus, she was now to take the Good News of Jesus to others. Jesus can't be contained. He must be obeyed and shared. He told Mary to go to his brothers, these disciples of his, and tell them the Good News of his resurrection and ascension (verse 17). Again, this was a message of Good News and grace she was to convey. Jesus graciously refers to these disciples, who had forsaken him like scattered sheep and even denied him, as his brothers. This Great Commission was articulated more fully when the risen Lord gave this commandment from the mount of his final ascension back into heaven:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

I find it meaningful that Mary Magdalene was the first to be commissioned as a witness for the risen Lord Jesus. She was, first of all, a woman, and the

testimony of a woman was not generally regarded as credible in that time and culture. Secondly, Mary was from Magdala, a notoriously wicked city. She had a reputation of having been possessed of seven demons prior to her being delivered by and following Jesus as her Lord (Luke 8:2). She was not a likely poster girl for a new religious movement, in other words. But that seems to be the way God works. Paul says God intentionally chooses the weak, foolish, and lowly in order to demonstrate his grace and to show the power of the gospel doesn't reside in us but in God and the "weak power" of the cross, given life and power by the resurrection (1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Ephesians 1:19-20).

I recall the definition of evangelism offered by DT Niles. "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

And we certainly have a world around us in need of the Bread of Life. John, whose life was transformed by the empty tomb, wrote that this Word of life, the risen Jesus, he had seen, heard and touched in Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. But John said that he couldn't keep silent about this risen Lord.

"The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete" (1 John 1:2-4).

This is our new agenda—making known the Good News of the risen Jesus. And I wonder what it takes for the Good News to become our agenda? And that includes those of us who are in the business of the Christian gospel. Robert W Dale (1829-95) was one of Great Britain's leading Congregational pastors and theologians who for much of his ministry failed to live and minister in the awareness and power of the Resurrection. He was brilliant, educated and polished, but lacking in power and fervor. One day as he was preparing an Easter sermon, "a realization of the risen Lord struck him with new power.

"'Christ is alive!' he said to himself. 'Alive—alive—alive!' He paused, and then said, 'Can that really be true? *Living* as really as I myself am?'

"He got up from his desk and began to walk about the study, repeating, 'Christ is living! Christ is living!'"

RW Dale "had known and believed this doctrine for years, but the reality of it overwhelmed him that day. From that time on, 'the living Christ' was the theme of his preaching, and he had his congregation sing an Easter hymn every Sunday morning. 'I want my people to get hold of the glorious fact that Christ is alive, and to rejoice over it; and Sunday, you know, is the day on which Christ left the dead'" (from Warren Wiersbe, page 129, *Be Transformed: John 13-21*).

When we (pastors, missionaries and theologians included) are transformed in our thinking and our awareness of the risen Lord, we take hold of this new

agenda. It changes what preoccupies us and raises us to a new level of living and serving. Like John, we see people as immortal souls, who have a destiny either in heaven or hell, and our desire is for them to know this fellowship of eternal life by believing in Jesus (John 21:31; 1 John 1:2-3). The disciples knew that because Jesus was risen they too would be given resurrection life.

CS Lewis, as he worked through his grief process, came to a fresh and powerful conviction of the resurrection, which transformed his grief over the death of his wife, Joy, to joyous hope. He realized that because Joy was now present with the Lord, even if it were within his power, it would not be right to bring her back to this mortal life on earth (Lewis, *A Grief Observed*). Would that we thought and lived with a similar understanding and conviction! Because Jesus lives, we also will live (John 14:19). Death has lost its sting. The grave has been robbed of its victory (1 Corinthians 15:54-58). Our agenda is to spread the word!

Conclusion:

The tomb is “not-quite-empty tomb” is still before us as a place of encountering the risen Lord. Are we living in despair, defeat and constant discouragement and doubt? Or, are we living in the awareness of this stupendous event and the presence of the risen Jesus, who lives in us and his life as us?

Again, let us, in the words of John Updike, like these first disciples, walk through the door:



*The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.*



*And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.*



*Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.*

(*Telephone Poles and Other Poems*, by John Updike.)

In other words, the risen Christ must be taken seriously eventually. On this Easter Sunday, I pray we will stand in openness and submission to the reality and transforming presence of the risen Lord. Some of you can take the life-changing look of faith. Others of us need to anew take on the agenda of our risen Lord, who is worthy to be shared. Life for every one of us can be different if we practice the real presence of Christ. He is risen!

Questions and thoughts for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Describe the mindset and emotional condition of Mary Magdalene, Peter and John as they approach the empty tomb.
2. Try to imagine the condition of the world today had Jesus not been raised from the dead. What difference has the resurrection made in your life?
3. Our Scripture text in verses 5, 6 and 8 describe three levels of looking at the abandoned yet undisturbed grave clothes (from looking from the outside to a close examination). Has there been in your life a growing awareness of who Jesus is and a deepening of your faith and spiritual understanding? Why is it important to grow in your faith and spiritual understanding?
4. Mary Magdalene's recognition of the risen Jesus came when he spoke her name. How does the Holy Spirit continue to speak and call people to a faith recognition of Jesus? See John 10: 27-28).
5. William Barclay said that verse 18 of our text gives us the definition of a Christian as "one who has seen the Lord." Do you think this is an adequate and accurate definition?
6. Why do you think Jesus told Mary to not continue holding on to her (verse 17)? How was her relationship with the risen Christ to be different from her relationship as a disciple of the pre-resurrection Jesus?
7. Why was it remarkable that Mary Magdalene was the first witness commissioned by Jesus to announce his resurrection? What do you think is our calling to witness to his resurrection?
8. Reflect on the impact the risen Christ has on your life. Are you living with the awareness of his resurrection? If suddenly you began to live in that awareness, how do you think you would live differently?

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