



EASTER SUNDAY

## From an Empty Tomb to Easter Faith

MARK 16:1-8

April 24, 2011

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When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" <sup>4</sup>And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back— it was very large. <sup>5</sup>And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." <sup>8</sup>And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

### Introduction

We were heading south on Highway 60 into Phoenix to catch a plane back to Chicago. I was in the passenger seat and my brother-in-law, Andy, was at the wheel. It was one of those gorgeous Arizona afternoons, not a wisp of cloud in the sky. Then, suddenly, out of nowhere, several menacing clouds appeared overhead and began dumping down on us and on the highway thousands of miniature Ping-Pong balls of ice. Like white marbles scattered all over your kitchen floor, the highway was instantly covered with them. It's of course neat to see; that is, unless you're barreling down that same highway at 70 miles an hour in a car, together with all the oncoming traffic.

Andy wisely tapped on the breaks to decrease speed. But it was already too late. Several hundred yards away, on the other side of the median, we could see another car had done the same, but had begun to fishtail on the sheet of ice marbles. As we fixed our attention on this car, everything shifted into slow motion; and we watched this car veer to gain control and then dash across the median and slam—bang!—right into the side of our car. The impact shot us sideways, off the road and—slam!—up against the guardrail, where after sliding forward for several yards, we finally came to a stop.

Miraculously, neither of us were seriously injured; thankfully, we both could walk. So we got out of the car to see about the people in the car that had hit ours. But as I got out of the car, I just stood there for a moment, peering over the side of the guardrail that stopped our car, only to find that the edge of the highway just a few feet from where I stood didn't make a gentle transition into an open field of soft green grass, but gave way to a cliff that dropped well over a hundred feet straight down. Whoa, I thought to myself. There was some invisible hand that kept our car from rolling right over the top of that guardrail and plummeting down that cliff.

Have you ever had an experience like that? One in which you know you've just brushed up against the supernatural? You can't necessarily prove it, but there's little doubt in your mind that something miraculous just happened in your life, perhaps to save your life. And can I ask you: How did you respond? What did that experience do to you; or what did it cause to go on inside of you?

For me, as I stood there on the side of Highway 60, I found myself seized with a sense of astonishment that was so strong it made me tremble; you might even say it caused me to fear—the horrible reality of what almost was, but also the invisible Power that kept that very thing from happening.

### **What Does An Empty Tomb Do For You?**

Trembling and astonishment and even fear—that's a natural human response to an encounter with the miraculous or supernatural! That's how the two women responded when they first saw Jesus' empty tomb; when they themselves brushed up against the supernatural, they too were seized with trembling and astonishment and even fear.

These two women, these two Marys, were eye witnesses of everything. They were first with Jesus in Galilee, so they saw his life and experienced his miracles and heard his teaching. They then followed him up to Jerusalem and were there eye witnesses of his crucifixion; they were among that small crowd of people on that first Good Friday who watched him die (15:40). And because they didn't scatter in fear like the rest of the disciples, these two women even saw the place where they placed Jesus' body for burial (15:47).

They knew where his tomb was. And so, on the first day of the week, these two faithful women go to Jesus' tomb, but are met there with one big surprise: the tomb itself is open.

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large (vv. 1-5).

And as if the surprise of the stone being rolled back wasn't enough to wake them up, they got an even bigger surprise upon entering the tomb. For there they find an angelic

looking man who tells them that the tomb is indeed empty (vv. 6-7). He's angelic looking because he's a young man and because he's dressed in a white robe and because he's sitting in an empty tomb like he belongs there. Note to self, then, the next time you're in a graveyard and you see a young man in a white robe standing beside an empty tomb, you too can safely assume it's an angel.

No doubt, the two women freaked out when they saw him; that's why he calmly assures them all is well—better than well, in fact. “Don't be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here” (v. 6). Then, pointing to the place where his body once was, he assures them this is not some mystical experience they're having. “See the place where they laid him,” he says. No, Jesus of Nazareth was once dead, but no longer. And he was once here, but no longer. He has risen and is no longer here. The angel then instructs the two women to go and spread the good news among his disciples and then to go to Galilee where they will meet the risen Christ. “There you will see him,” the angel says, “just as he told you” (v. 7).

These two Marys, these two unsuspecting women, who certainly weren't looking for a resurrection, nevertheless wound up seeing the empty tomb where Jesus once lay. But more than that, they meet an angel who confirms he's risen from the dead. They've obviously seen something miraculous; they've brushed up against the supernatural.

But how did they respond? You might think they would have begun to cry, letting out loud heaves of joy and relief because their Lord was in fact alive, like a mother who's just found her lost child after the child had many hours gone missing. But that's not what they do. Or you might have guessed that they would've prayed; that's a kind of natural religious thing to do in the face of the supernatural. But they don't do that either. Perhaps you music types would think this would have been the perfect occasion to break out into the Hallelujah chorus, even singing it twice through. But they don't do that either.

Friends, they don't even respond with Easter faith. No, not with faith, but with fear; in fact, the kind that causes them to flee, as though it were the scene of a crime. “And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (v. 8).

Not exactly the response one would expect. But I suspect that may have been my own response were I to have brushed up against the supernatural like they did; perhaps it would have been yours as well.

### **Easter Faith Comes By Meeting the Living Christ**

You see, the empty tomb is an astonishing fact of history; it's also a creditable fact of history and an indispensable part of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the empty tomb as a credible fact of history, it's still worth consulting the century-old essay by Princeton theologian, B. B. Warfield, “The Resurrection of Christ a Historical Fact,” in *Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1*, pp. 178-192; and now, of course, one should look to the massive work by N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

But you need to understand this: encountering an empty tomb doesn't create Easter faith. Brushing up against the supernatural doesn't cause you to believe. The best it can do is make you tremble with astonishment and perhaps even fear.

You see, in order for true faith to be borne in your heart, something else must happen in your life. But what is that something else?

In the Gospel of John, we're told that Mary Magdalene, after her first visit, came a second time to Jesus' tomb. Perhaps she'd come back to see if the tomb really was empty or was this just some kind of a weird dream she was having. John tells us she came to the tomb and stood outside weeping, probably overtaken with the mystery and tragedy of it all.

But then, suddenly, she turns around, and there she sees Jesus standing in front of her. Yet evidently, as John tells us, "she did not know that it was Jesus" (20:14). But Jesus knew who she was, and he addresses her this way: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"

Such tender words, but here the story takes a slightly humorous turn. Mary mistakes the risen Christ for the local gardener; one wonders, was it the dirt under his fingernails or the strange glow all around him. In any event, it gets worse than that; she's annoyed with the guy because she thinks he may have been the one to run off with his body. So she says to him, in effect, "Hey, listen, I don't have time for this nonsense; if you took the body and hid it somewhere, tell me where it is" (cf. 20:15).

I love this fascinating exchange. Because isn't that how Jesus meets each one of us. Who can say that when Jesus showed up in your life you were able to say to him: "I'm glad you're here; I've been waiting for you to show up." Or, "Ah, there you are, I've been looking all over for you!" No, we usually find ourselves swatting around in the dark until Jesus finally turns on the lights and we see his face. It usually takes some time on our part—and great patience and generosity on Jesus' part—for us to come to recognize who it is that's actually speaking to us.

Mary's obviously perturbed by the presence of this stranger. But Jesus is nonetheless wonderfully gracious toward her. He simply says to her one single word, a simple word she'd heard a million times before; she knew it so well because it was her own name; but this time it was different, different because of the one who was now speaking to her: "Jesus said to her: 'Mary'. She turned and said to him in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means Teacher)" (20:16). And, immediately, Mary fell at his feet and began to worship. She'd met the risen Christ!

You know, the truth is dead people can still have a powerful effect on our lives. In fact, many dead people still do: through what they've left behind, their ideas or artwork, what they've built or what they've done. But what no dead person can do is surprise you; the dead can no longer surprise you with their presence, as Jesus surprised Mary outside his own tomb. Nor can the dead find you, wherever you are, and there call you by name, the way in which Jesus did for Mary—and for millions of others since that first Easter morning.

## Go To Where You Will Meet Him

Listen, friend, the fact of the empty tomb only becomes the reality of Easter faith when you actually meet the risen Christ. Apart from a personal encounter with the living Lord, you'll have only brushed up against the supernatural and gone away with goose-bumps. Nothing more, or at least nothing lasting and saving and life-transforming.

To be sure, the empty tomb is an essential part of the Christian faith. Make no mistake about it. Christianity is bound up with this very specific historical claim. So much so that if you show me Jesus' dead body, I'm going to find something else to do on Sunday morning. I'll probably take up golf. The tomb must be empty, otherwise the party's over.

But, at the end of the day, Christians don't believe in an empty tomb; we believe in a living Christ. Our faith and trust is not in the fact that Jesus' tomb is empty, but in the fact that Jesus Christ himself lives and will come again.

So, then, if you're going to believe in the resurrection of Jesus in a way that really matters, you must see the risen Christ for yourself. You must go, therefore, to a place where he can be found, to a place where you can meet him, to a place where you can see him.

Did you catch that wonderful promise the angel gave to the two women? "But go," he said to them, "and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. *There you will see him, just as he told you*" (16:7).

Hear this, then: the risen Christ promises to meet you, if you go to a place where he can be found. His earliest disciples had to go to Galilee in order to see the risen Christ. But how about you and me? Where do we go to meet him? Where can we go and find his presence?

*You can find his presence, first of all, among his people.* The last words Jesus spoke to his disciples were these: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). This is the risen Christ's pledge to be with and among his followers; his very presence residing with them and indeed dwelling in them. This is why the Bible calls followers of Jesus "the body of Christ." What is a body but the way in which a person makes his presence felt in the world. And that's exactly what Christians are: they are the way in which the risen Christ makes his presence felt in our world. This means, then, that if you want to meet the risen Christ, you need to be among his people, his followers. There you will encounter his presence; there you will meet him; for there he has promised to be present in the world and to the world.

But there's a second way in which you can meet the risen Christ, and that is by *hearing him speak to you through his word, the Bible*. Because Jesus Christ is alive, he continues not only to act, but to speak. And he speaks in and through his inspired word, the word of God, the Bible. This book is not a dead book, a charming collection of antiquated stories and warm-hearted moral lessons, useful for children but not much good for serious adults. No, this is a living book. And it's a living book because it has a living Author who continues to make his presence felt in the world through the sound of his voice. This means, then, that if you want to meet the risen Christ, you need to take up and read this book. There you will encounter his presence; there you will meet him; for there he has promised to be present in the world and to the world.

Being among his people and hearing his word, the Bible; perhaps I don't need to point out to any of you that that's what's going on right now, at this very moment. Friend, this is the place where you can meet the risen Christ; in fact, this is the very moment. Will you turn to see him? Will you listen for his voice calling your name?

## **Conclusion**

Friends, the tomb is empty. But more than that, Jesus Christ is alive. Jesus of Nazareth, God's only Son, our Lord. Born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day he rose again from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of God; and from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

This Jesus, he is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent (Col. 1:15, 18-19). He is the one through whom God created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:2-3). He is the Alpha and Omega, the one who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (Rev. 1:8). He is the first and the last, the living one, the one who died, and yet, behold, is now alive forevermore; he is the one who holds the keys of Death and Hades (Rev. 1:18). He is the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6).

Yet he is the one who stands ready to meet you, to be seen by you, even to call you by name. Will you allow your heart to be turned toward him this morning, just like Mary turned to see him on the first Easter morning? And will you listen for his voice, him speaking to you, him perhaps even calling you by name?

Amen.

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