

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. ² 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!" ³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (John 20:1-8

The Tomb is Empty!

Today, all over the world, people are heading to Jesus' tomb. Not physically, of course. We're not going to board an airplane and take off for the Holy Land today. But spiritually, Christians all over the world are traveling with those devoted, Christian women who went and found Jesus' tomb open and empty. You and I are making that trip spiritually today. But wouldn't it be cool to go to Israel and see the actual tomb Jesus lay in? What would it mean to you to touch the place where Jesus' body was laid down dead and where it came back to life? What would it mean to stand there where the angels told the women the good news of the resurrection? That would be something special. But you know what? You can't do it because no one knows for sure where Jesus' tomb was. There are at least two major sites in Israel that compete for the honor and both of them were identified centuries after Jesus rose. That makes Christianity different from some other religions. Muslims can visit the tomb of Muhammad in Mecca and they sometimes jeer at Christians because we have no tomb like theirs. There are famous tombs all over the world that people visit – the pyramids in Egypt are tombs. The Taj Mahal in India is a tomb. Here in the United States you can go to Arlington National Cemetery and see the eternal flame on the tomb of President Kennedy. Indeed, most of our presidents lie in tombs you can visit. But we Christians really have no tomb to visit. That is the point! Even if we could go to it, there is no body there. **The tomb is empty!**

I.

Of course, on the first Easter, the location of Jesus' tomb was quite well known. On Friday evening, two of Jesus' followers had put his body in the tomb which belonged to one of them. The women who had followed Jesus noted the location. At the request of Jesus' enemies, Pontius Pilate had sent a detachment of soldiers to guard the tomb because Jesus' enemies understood much better than his friends that he had promised to rise from the dead. Today, we follow those friends as they make their Easter morning visits to the tomb. **The tomb is empty. But see how people come to that tomb.**

The first friend of Jesus that we're following is Mary Magdalene. Mary has caught the imagination of Christians for centuries. Some people have imagined that she had romantic feelings or even a romantic relationship with the Lord. She has often been confused with another woman who was a prostitute. But the Bible never says that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute or that she had lived a particularly sinful life. It certainly never says she was even physically attracted to Jesus. The Bible says that she had been possessed by seven demons and Jesus drove those demons out. As a result of that act of God's mercy, Mary became a dedicated follower of the Lord. She was part of a small group of women who followed Jesus on his missionary trips and supported him and his disciples with their own money. You might say that she was part of the original ladies guild or women's missionary society.

Mary got up before the sun rose on the first Easter morning to go to the tomb of Jesus. Now, love did drive her out of bed early that morning. Not romantic love, but love for her pastor and her Lord. Yet, Mary didn't run to the tomb like a young girl excited to see an old friend or a favorite relative. She didn't skip and sing as the sun rose and the birds sang. Mary's heart was broken because she had watched her Lord die. So why was she going to the tomb? By the time they had removed Jesus' body from the cross on Friday night, it was getting close to sundown. Under Jewish law, the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday. Mary and the other women could not do regular work on the Sabbath. They had to wait and rest until sundown Saturday. Of

course, then it was too late to go out and take care of Jesus' body. But as early the next morning as she could, Mary was up and on her way, as were several other women.

They went to offer one last, sad service to Jesus – to give him a decent burial. They went to say good-bye. They were crushed by sorrow and they had no hope that they would find him alive, even though he had promised he would rise. But when they reached the tomb, they discovered that it was open. At this point, it gets a little difficult to follow what all four gospel writers say. But it seems that Mary did not go inside while the other women did. Instead, she turned and ran to find Peter and John. So she missed the angels that the women who went inside saw. She didn't hear the good news they heard. She jumped to a conclusion that made perfect sense in that time and place, but which was totally and completely wrong.

What did Mary think? Someone had broken into the tomb and stolen Jesus' body. Tomb robbers were a plague on ancient societies. People often buried their loved ones with jewelry or other valuables, just like today. Tomb robbers preyed on the newly buried. To save time, they often dragged the body away to somewhere safe. They ripped apart the rest of the tomb looking for anything to make their efforts worthwhile. This was such a well-known problem that Mary appears to have just assumed Jesus' body was gone – unless she got a glimpse of the inside of the tomb like John did later and saw that it wasn't there.

She gave her breathless, logical, terrible – and totally false – news to Peter and John. Those two jumped up and ran to the tomb. John got there first, but we want to deal with Peter first. How did Peter go to the tomb? Not just without hope, like Mary. Peter was deeply troubled and guilty. This had been the worst weekend of his life. On Thursday night, Peter had boasted that he would suffer death rather than fall away from Jesus, but just a few hours later he had denied the Lord three times. Peter, who had seen Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, whose mother-in-law Jesus had healed, Peter, who had so often been the spokesman for the other disciples, was too afraid to confess Jesus. The last time he had seen Jesus, the Lord was in the clutches of the high priest and he had turned and looked straight at Peter. Peter had run out and wept bitterly. He was still wrestling with all that guilt and shame.

John was another story. He, too, had run away in the garden of Gethsemane. But he had followed Jesus through the night and the next day. He was even there at the cross. Jesus himself had asked John to care for his mother in the years to come. John was no doubt just as grief stricken as Peter and Mary, but he probably didn't carry the burden of guilt that Peter did. The most obvious thing that John writes about himself in this account is his hesitation. He reached the tomb first, he bent over and looked in, but he didn't go in until after Peter got there. Was he afraid? From the way this account ends, it seems almost certain that John was remembering Jesus' promise to rise. Was he afraid to go in and confront the evidence of tomb robbers and lose all hope? Or was he just skeptical?

My friends, all people go to Jesus' tomb carrying these burdens. How many of us are weighed down by sadness today? Obviously, we didn't show up here expecting to hear that Jesus is still dead. But how many of us came here this morning after a night of sadness and uncertainty? At least one family in our congregation is facing a funeral on Tuesday. How many of the rest of us are wrestling with illness and hardship? How many of us are facing a holiday in which our relationships with relatives and in-laws will be strained and painful? How many of us came here with heavy hearts, like Mary had?

And how many of us came like Peter, full of guilt over our sins? How many of us have to admit that we haven't been in church since Christmas or last Easter or for an even longer period of time? How many of us are haunted by words we said to people we love – words that we can never take back? How many of us have ruined relationships by our sinful behavior and it breaks our hearts today? And how many of us are like John, almost afraid to come here and learn more, almost afraid to examine our faith because we really aren't all that sure about it? This is how sinners come to the tomb of Christ. Full of doubt and sorrow and unbelief.

II.

But that is not how we leave. This tomb changes our lives and our hearts. Because it is the tomb of Christ. The story didn't end when Jesus died. He rose. And the story of his followers didn't end with a sad journey out to the tomb. God loved them too much to let that be the last that we heard or know of them – more important than that, God loved them too much to let that be his last word to them. God intervened in their lives with the gospel, with the announcement that the tomb was empty not by robbery, but by his power and plan.

The tomb is empty! See how people leave that tomb.

The empty tomb changed the heart of everyone who visited it that morning. Mary Magdalene didn't go in with Peter and John. She waited outside, weeping for her missing Lord even after Peter and John left. When Jesus came to her, she denied the evidence of her watery eyes. But when he called her name, she knew. And she ran and told the disciples that Jesus was risen. Of course, the other ladies had heard the angel tell them that Jesus was risen. Their sorrow turned to joy. As they raced home, Jesus appeared to them, too.

In the words we read, John experienced the greatest change. When he first got there, he wouldn't even go in. He could see that the grave clothes were lying discarded in the tomb, but it wasn't until he went inside that he realized that Mary was wrong. He tells us that Peter saw **“the 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.”** No grave robber would stop to fold up the cloth that covered the dead person's face. When John came in and saw that, the light went on. He must have remembered all the times Jesus said that he was going up to Jerusalem to die and that on the third day, he would rise. He believed.

Now John's faith was weak. He was not ready to announce his conviction to the world or even to Peter yet. Doubts must have plagued his faith in the hours to come because that very night, John was hiding behind locked doors with the rest of the disciples afraid of what the Jews would do to them. Jesus still had to come and prove that he really was risen. But the seed of faith was there at this moment. John walked away a different person, a person who knew that the sorrow of the weekend was over. He began – slowly and haltingly – to experience the joy of Jesus' resurrection.

The only one who walked away unconvinced was Peter. Luke tells us that he went away wondering what had happened. The light didn't go on for him. Peter walked away still struggling with his guilt and shame. Sometimes it's hard for us to let go of our guilt. People who think highly of themselves are most prone to believing their failures are irredeemable. Peter didn't believe until Jesus spoke to him personally. We know that he did at some point during that first day. We don't know exactly when, but Jesus showed him that the empty tomb meant that he was forgiven.

My friends, that resurrection changes us, too. Every sinner carries his load of grief or doubt or guilt. But in the resurrection, Christ heals us. Jesus rose and that means that every believer will rise. When Jesus returns, he will make these bodies new. The bodies of our loved ones who died in faith will live again. And until these bodies rise, Jesus keeps our souls with him in heaven. Jesus rose and that is the answer to the guilt we torture ourselves with. Every sin that we've ever committed is paid for and forgiven. Jesus has wiped away every one of our cruel words and thoughtless actions. When our sins have been particularly fierce, we have trouble accepting that the message of the tomb applies to us. We walk away like Peter wondering, but not convinced. But God keeps coming back to us in the gospel. He keeps repeating the good news until the Holy Spirit conquers our hearts and gives us relief. Jesus rose. That message alone can give us true and constant faith. In this life, faith rises and falls. We do have those moments of joy and certainty, but we also have times when we doubt and struggle. God's power to conquer our doubts is the gospel, the message that Jesus lives.

Jesus rose. God keeps taking us back to that empty tomb because his power lies in the gospel. We will live because he does. That's why it's actually a good thing that we can't go to his physical tomb. We can't make it a shrine to our doubts or corrupt it with our ideas. The only way that we can go and see the place where Jesus lay is through the Scriptures. Those Scriptures tell us that he is not there. He is risen. The tomb is empty and we will live with him forever. Rejoice my brothers and sisters in Christ! Amen.