

Sermon Reading: John 20:1-18

Sermon Theme: See the Empty Tomb and Believe

Walk with me as we travel through a cemetery. There are the rows of headstones with the different names, years, maybe a picture or engraving; do you stop to wonder, “What was their story?” You might notice the various floral arrangements, a little flag, a lonely flower, a wreath left behind by loved ones. Do you notice the special quiet, calmness that you can almost feel? Then there’s the inevitable thought of death. Thoughts of someone who has passed—a loved one, a friend—that all of sudden grabs your attention. Cemeteries can remind us of the finality and inevitability that death comes to all. Death hits us like a ton of bricks. You can try and prepare for it all you want, you tell yourself that you are ready, but when that loved one passes away it still comes as a shock. One moment they were here, the next they are gone and they aren’t coming back. In a way a cemetery looks like a plot of land documenting all who have lost. They lost that great battle of life. No matter how hard or how well they fought, eventually death wins. No wonder Mary, Peter, and John reacted the way they did that first Easter morning. No wonder they struggled to believe. Can we blame them? It seemed like once again death had won; we had lost. But Jesus’ tomb on that first Easter tells a different story.

Early Sunday morning, the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene started on what must have been an agonizingly long walk to the tomb. It had been officially three days since she watched her Lord, her friend, her teacher Jesus breathe his last and die on that cross. So, with some other women, she went to the tomb to give her Lord her last respects and finish the burial preparations. But when she arrived with the women, the large stone that was supposed to be at the entrance to the tomb was not in its place. She doesn’t need to look into the tomb to make a completely logical conclusion. She runs to Peter and the disciple Jesus loved—that is the disciple John—and reports, *“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him.”*

So Peter and John start for the tomb which soon turns into running. What were they going to find? What was Mary talking about? What was going on? If the stone is rolled away, and the body isn’t there, then maybe...? They had to see for themselves.

John wasn’t going to slow down and he wasn’t going to wait for Peter to catch up, so he outruns Peter and reaches the tomb first. He bends over and can see quite clearly the strips of linen cloths lying there where a body was supposed to be. But he doesn’t go in. It’s almost as if he waits at the entrance contemplating, figuring out what he was seeing. A grave robber wouldn’t have done that. If someone was just stealing a body, they wouldn’t have taken the time to unwrap the body. Finally, Peter arrives and barges into the tomb. And Peter sees what John saw. The linen cloths were lying there. Then there’s

something else very interesting: the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head was separated from the other cloths and folded...odd. If someone took the time to unwrap the body, it surely doesn't make sense that they would fold one cloth. One thing is for certain: the Lord was no longer there; the tomb, it was empty of any body. But it wasn't because the grave had been robbed—John saw and believed—Jesus had risen.

But Peter and John still were having some issues. They believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but the joy of Easter was still hidden from them. They did not understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead. They didn't comprehend the implications of this empty tomb. They saw the facts, but still it didn't quite register. You see it in their reaction: they just go back home.

Can we blame them? Think of how hard it is for you to willingly believe the seemingly unbelievable. Think of the struggle you fight against when putting down that trained skeptic in yourself even when you see the facts.

Then think how we do not always fully understand what it means for us that Jesus rose from the dead. That's what it seems when we neglect to see the serious need for a Savior and aren't all that bothered when we pull ourselves from contact with him in study of his Word, receiving the Lord's Supper, coming to God's house for worship on a regular basis. Instead of seeing the need for the risen Savior, we ignore the seriousness of the wrongs we commit in our lives trying to overlook the blatant consequences and results. How quickly we seem to forget Jesus' empty tomb when we go back into that sin as if we are still chained and tied to sin. It seems like we forget what Easter means when instead of trusting God's promises, we doubt. This doubting happens so often that we can forget that doubting is not trusting God above all things. Be hard on Peter and John and their struggle to believe and then also be hard on yourself if you do not fully believe. Because, it is sinful to not trust God. It is a sin to not believe this Easter truth that Jesus is risen is something you need in and for your life.

And then thank God that he works to turn unbelieving skeptic hearts into hearts that trust and believe. No, Peter and John did not completely understand it at the time. They would need more help and clarity later understanding that it was necessary for Jesus to rise from the dead. While on this earth our faith is never perfect and all too often we struggle with doubts. But thanks be to God he does not take away this Easter truth and remove Jesus' forgiveness from you. Instead, he continues to work through his Word to lead us to see the tomb and to grow in our faith and understanding.

Mary, she's still struggling. She too saw the proof in the empty tomb, and yet there she is standing outside of the tomb crying. She bends over almost as if to check, "Maybe I was wrong? Maybe his body is still there?" And what does she see? Two angels in white are seated where Jesus' body had been. They ask a very a simple question,

“*Woman, why are you crying?*” It should have been obvious. But the cloths, the angels, the question did not register with Mary. Her Lord, whom she had loved, had been taken from her—taken from her in death and now his body was taken as well. The first was bad enough; not knowing where he was left her almost inconsolable. What would have dried her tears was within her grasp, but she did not see it.

We can't really blame Mary that much either, can we? Think of how we struggle to believe God's promises even when they are so clearly stated in his Word. Think of how quick we are to say, “I know but...” but then still not believe. Think of how much easier it is to come up with excuses than it is to trust. Consider how frequently and easily we seemingly refuse or fail to see God's blessings in our lives as proof of his fulfilled promises. But instead we focus on everything that is going wrong or not up to our standards. We can blame Mary; we can blame ourselves too.

But why are we at a tomb in the first place? It's to teach us and prove to us that God is serious. It teaches us that he is serious about sin. Had sin not been that serious, we wouldn't have needed a Savior to save us from sin. But if God had overlooked the wrongs we have done, then it is as if he is putting his stamp of approval on our doubting and sinful lifestyle allowing us to burn for eternity in hell. If he did not carry out his justice, then we would forever be lost. That's how serious sin is: only someone who didn't deserve it had to suffer and die for you and me who deserve the punishment, pain, and death eternally in hell for not trusting God above all things.

It's there at the tomb that we see God also is serious about his promises. While Mary was still crying someone else speaks to her. Mary thinks it's just the gardener coming by. Again the question, “Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” It should have been another clue for Mary when this guy knew she was looking for someone. But still Mary didn't see it. Instead, “If it's the gardener,” Mary may have thought, “maybe he took the body, *Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.*” She still is lost in her unbelief. Even with the answer right before her eyes, she cannot see it. Grief had caused her to be blind. Sadness shut her eyes of faith. But in his tender love Jesus comes to dry her eyes, “Mary,” is all he has to say. And it's almost as if the blinds have been opened, the cover has been pulled off, she cries out recognizing her loved one, “*Rabboni! Teacher!*”

Sin leaves us blind. It shuts our eyes to the truth. But with speaking his Word, Jesus shines his light into your heart to see the empty tomb: He is not here, he is risen. Yes, Jesus died on that cross. Sin is serious. Because Jesus claimed your sin to be his own, he was forsaken by his Father in heaven because that's what sin does: sin separates us from God. And because Jesus claimed your sin, he died. The payment for sin is death. But

with him, your sin died. And then with him your sin was buried in that tomb. And your sin—including that sin of doubt—remained in that tomb with the linen burial cloths.

But Jesus did not. The Father accepted Jesus' payment on that cross and raised him as he promised three days later on that first day of the week, the first Easter Sunday morning. He who died, now is alive. We who were once enemies of God because of sin, now call God our Father; Jesus is our brother. In the waters of baptism you were raised with Christ from the dead and were made alive a child of God through faith in Christ Jesus. If God did not accept the payment, Jesus would have still been in that tomb. Had God not raised Jesus from the dead, we would still be lost.

But Jesus lives! Death has been defeated. Death has no power here. Yes, our time on this earth has an end date. Yes, death still has its sting. But the sting is not as strong. Because Jesus lives, death is not the end but the beginning of eternity in heaven for God's people, those who believe. Sin was defeated. Satan's head was crushed. Death has been swallowed up in victory. And so Jesus comes to you in his Word to dry your tears assuring you that your sins have been forgiven, life with him does not end, but is yours through faith. As with Mary, Jesus sends you to go out and share this good news, **HE LIVES!** Throw in the empty tomb whatever doubts there are of God's love and grace. See the empty tomb and believe. Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.