

March 27, 2005
The Festival of the Resurrection

“The Tomb Is Empty!”

MATTHEW 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. ² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. ⁵ The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.” ⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Perhaps you had this friendly joke played on you when you were a little child. Some older kids asked you to point to your head, spell out some letters and then guess the word they were spelling. You couldn't wait to show them that you could read words just as the older kids did. You pointed to your head and repeated the letters they gave you. “E. M. P. T. Y.” You put the words together in your head and proudly blurted out the word “Empty” with the finger pointing to your head. They laughed and you did too at the clever joke they had played on you.

This celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead is a time for laughing and joy, even joking around in a good sort of way. For you see this morning we can point our finger to the tomb of Jesus, spell out the words, E. M. P. T. Y. and say, “Empty!” The celebration of Jesus' resurrection calls for more than just a casual greeting of “Happy Easter.” This glorious celebration calls on us to recapture the ancient custom of greeting each other with the words, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” An empty tomb means hearts so filled with joy we have to burst forth with loud alleluias.

1) Say good morning to a glorious fact

What if you could wake up every morning facing each new day with the glorious fact that the tomb is empty? You can because Jesus is alive. The women who went to the tomb did not have this historic fact of the resurrection beating in their hearts and pulsing through their veins. They came at the crack of dawn with shattered hopes and dreams. We read, “After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.”

It says they went to look at the tomb. With the light of dawn barely rising over the eastern hills, these women were hoping to see and touch the lifeless body of Jesus one more

time. They wanted to finish the job of wrapping it in linen and spices as their custom was. When someone dies there is often the desire for closure that comes with seeing the body one more time before it is placed into the ground or reduced to ashes and dust. That's what these women were looking for as they made their way to the tomb. They were more concerned about who would roll the stone away for them than they were checking out whether Jesus' words about rising from the dead were really true.

The Lord had a different morning waiting for them as they drew closer to the tomb. The fact of Jesus resurrection was about to be permanently planted into their minds and hearts, never to be forgotten. What a great morning it was and still is today. There was a large earthquake. Then, "An angel of the Lord came from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were as white as snow." The angel did not roll the stone away to let Jesus out of the grave. He rolled away the stone to show that the tomb was empty. Don't you just love how it says, "He rolled back the stone and sat on it." He sat on the stone, triumphant and victorious, waiting to share this glorious fact with the women who are about to come face to face with the greatest event in the history of the world.

What if you could wake up every morning and see the angel sitting on the stone, ready to greet you with the words, "He is not here. He has risen from the dead. Come and see the place where he lay?" You can because the tomb is empty. What if you could face each new day always hearing the words of the psalmist speaking to you about the resurrection of Jesus and greeting you with the words, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it?" You can. The tomb is empty.

Some years ago, in the deep South, a young boy lost his mother. His father hired a Christian nanny named Mandy to raise the boy. Her skin was dark and his was white. She loved this boy as her own and he loved her. Every morning she would wake him up from his sleep with the words, "Wake up God's mornin' has come." He grew up, went to school, and developed a successful career. Always when he came home to visit, his beloved Mandy would wake him in the morning with the words, "Wake up God's mornin' is come." One day he received a call that his beloved Mandy had died. He went to funeral to celebrate the hope of the resurrection. He specifically requested that if he should die before Jesus returned in glory, he wanted to be buried next to Mandy because when Jesus came back to raise us from the dead, he wanted to hear Mandy's beautiful voice saying to him one more time, "Wake up God's mornin' is come."

God's morning has come and it is here, and it will come again. The tomb is empty. Jesus has risen. Every day the angel is sitting on the stone next to your bed as you wake up in the morning, in the chair next to yours where you eat your breakfast, in the passenger side of car as you drive the freeway. Even in the darkest of days and gloomiest nights, the gracious invitation rings out for us to face each new day of life, "He is not here, he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

2) Say goodbye to fear

You can say good morning to the fact that Jesus has risen from the dead. You can also say goodbye to all fear. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid." Imagine their

fears. Who would talk to the Roman soldiers and ask them to roll away the stone? What if someone stole the body of Jesus and desecrated it even more? What if Jesus were not Lord and God as he claimed? Would that make everything he said a bunch of lies? They heard the angel say to them, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who as crucified. He is not here; he has risen just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

Did you catch what the angel said? Jesus has risen from the dead just as he said. Jesus predicted his death and resurrection again and again, He said, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth." Because Jesus kept his Word to rise from the dead, we can lean on his words, hang on them, tie ourselves to them, trust them and never be afraid that we will be left hanging without hope.

Crime Scene Investigators look for what they call forensic evidence to establish their case and arrest a criminal. Do you want evidence that assures you this morning that Jesus is alive and you do not have to be afraid? Look at the tomb. Listen to the angel. But then cling to the fact that Jesus promised he would rise from the dead, and kept his Word. And if you further examine the forensic evidence in the Old Testament and you will discover numerous references to the Messiah's suffering, death, and his resurrection. Isaiah 53 details Jesus' suffering with such words as "He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities." It also includes the words about his resurrection, "And he shall see the light of life." Because of the empty tomb you don't have to be afraid to answer the tough questions of life such as, "Where did I come from? Why am I here? What is going to happen to me when I die?" Because the tomb is empty you have the answers and you don't have to be afraid.

The angel told the women to share this message with the disciples so they could also goodbye to their fears. "Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him." Notice what Jesus told the women when he met them on their way. "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Jesus wanted these women to know that they were his sisters, and that the disciples who had been so unfaithful to him during the crucifixion were still his brothers. That same night he appeared to them as they were trembling with fear behind closed doors and say, "Peace to you." He showed them the nail marks in his hands and its says in John 20, "They were overjoyed when they saw the Lord." That night they had the privilege of saying goodbye to the ultimate fear, "Will God accept me when I die?"

Have you ever been really afraid? Remember the time you nearly drowned while surfing? Or what about the time you almost hydroplaned on the wet road and crashed? Your heart was pounding with fear. Let's be honest this morning. If you are a Christian some of your most frightening moments have come from those awful days when you opened yourself up to sin in a way that left you trembling with fear. Deep from within you came the cry that Christians have prayed over the centuries when confronted with the how damaging sin can be if left to grow and do its damage in our lives. "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." And what if you have been slack in your Christian faith, cutting corners with God, and deep down inside of you is this fear that says, "What if it gets worse?"

This morning is a time to come back to our God and look what he has done for us in empty tomb. When Christ died for you on the cross he did not cry out with the words, "I have done my part now you have to do your part." When his job of paying for your sin and mine was completed he cried out, "It is finished!" The empty tomb is your supreme proof and your forensic evidence the Father accepted the sacrifice of Jesus in your behalf and declared you not guilty. Romans 4:25 shows us the importance of this empty tomb as our assurance of peace with God when it says "Jesus was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification." If one sin was still left on Jesus unpaid, the Father would not have raised him from the dead and the tomb would not have been empty.

In conclusion this morning, I would like to have you take your finger and point it forward to the place where your body will someday rest, a grave, a crypt, the waters of the ocean, the dirt in the ground. Or point to the grave of one of your loved ones who died in Jesus and repeat these letters after me, E.M.P.T.Y. My tomb will be empty. As the old spiritual song says, "It is goin' be a getting' up mornin'" The children in our Easter for Kids will be opening little plastic eggs this morning with symbols of the resurrection and new life that is ours. Some will find a little flower, others a cross, some a small egg, and others will open eggs that are empty to symbolize the fact that someday our graves will be empty wherever they might be. Christ is risen! (Cong. "He is risen indeed!" The tomb is (cong. "Empty!). Amen.