

**"The Empty Tomb"**  
**John 20:1-10**  
**Mililani Community Church**  
**Pastor Rick Bartosik**  
**Easter Sunday 2000**

INTRODUCTION: We have a wonderful tradition in our church of placing a cross at the front on Easter Sunday morning and covering it with flowers. In the 1st century, to see a cross covered with flowers would have been inconceivable! The cross was a symbol of the most horrifying death known to man. The Romans dreaded crucifixion and reserved this method of capital punishment only for slaves and the worst of criminals. But our cross is covered with flowers, because the cross for us symbolizes something very precious. It is the symbol of the greatest love story the world has ever known. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that WHOSOEVER believes on him shall not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The Cross symbolizes God's wonderful plan of salvation through the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

Today on Easter Sunday we remember that after Jesus died on the Cross, he rose from the dead on the third day. The death of Jesus on the cross would have simply been a great tragedy, if there were no resurrection. But the resurrection of Christ proved that his mission was accomplished and that through his death he conquered sin and death for us.

The resurrection of Jesus proved that God has accepted His death on the cross as a payment for our sins. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, we would have no hope of the forgiveness of our sins. The Apostle Paul says in I Cor. 15, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain, you are still in your sins." The Apostle Peter writes in I Peter 1, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

The resurrection proved that Jesus really was the Messiah the prophets foretold. Peter said to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah—this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36).

The resurrection proved that Jesus really is the eternal Son of God. Romans 1:4 says, "[He] was declared with power to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead..."

The resurrection proved that He will return someday as He promised... to be the judge of the living and the dead "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). Jesus himself said in John 5:28: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear my voice

and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

This morning, in the few minutes we have together, I want you to consider with me one of the greatest historical evidences for the resurrection of Jesus Christ—THE EMPTY TOMB. Open your Bibles to the Gospel of John chapter 20. Chapter 19 of John's Gospel ends with the record of the death and the burial of Jesus. If the Gospel of John had ended with chapter 19--and the account of the death and burial of Christ—we would have no gospel—no good news—no assurance of forgiveness of our sins—no hope! ---But the story doesn't end there; because in chapter 20 John goes on to give us his eyewitness account of the resurrection.

The startling fact is that when Peter and John arrived at the tomb on Easter morning it was not quite empty. Yes, the body of Jesus was gone. But something was still there: the grave clothes.

The Bible suggests that there was something about them so striking that John saw them and believed that Jesus had risen from the dead.

During the last century a well-known French critic of the Gospels, Ernest Renan, argued that the Christian faith in the resurrection was the result of rumors spread by Mary Magdalene who had suffered a hallucination—thinking she had seen Jesus.

But this could not be. Mary did not suffer a hallucination. The last thing she ever expected was the resurrection of her Lord. And John here testifies that HE actually believed...some time before Mary returned to the tomb and had her meeting with Jesus in the garden.

Let's review the events of that first Easter morning  
Jesus had been crucified on Friday. His body lay in the tomb until the resurrection that took place before dawn on Sunday morning.

At this point the women came to the tomb bearing spices to anoint his body. There were at least four women and probably more. Matthew says the group included Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, that is, Mary the mother of James and Joseph. Mark adds that Salome was present.

Luke says that Joanna was also along with the others. These women started out while it was still dark and arrived at the tomb in the early dawn.

When they reached the tomb they were astonished to find the stone removed from the entrance. Imagine them standing there—afraid to go too close, wondering what had happened. Who moved the stone? Has the tomb been pilfered? Has the body of Jesus been stolen? Has Joseph of Aramathaea removed it to another place? What should they do? At last they decided that the disciples had to be told, and Mary Magdalene was sent to find them. Not one of them even imagined that Jesus had risen from the dead!

After a while it grew lighter and the women grew bolder and decided to look into the tomb. There they saw the angels. They were afraid, but an angel said "Fear not; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples." (Matthew 28:5-7).

Meanwhile Mary Magdalene had found Peter and John. They immediately ran for the tomb---leaving Mary far behind.

John was the younger of the two. He arrived at the tomb first. He stooped to look through the narrow opening and saw the graveclothes. Then Peter arrived, brushed John aside and plunged into the tomb.

When John saw the graveclothes, he just got a glance of them from outside the tomb (verse 5). In verse five the word translated "looked" is *blepo* the most common word for seeing. It suggests nothing more than a glance. But when Peter arrived, he scrutinized the grave clothes carefully (v. 6-7). The Greek word used for what Peter did, when he "saw the strips of linen lying there" is the word—*theoreo*. We get our word "theory" and "theorize" from it. Luke 24:12 says he "went away wondering to himself what had happened."

At this point John entered, and saw what Peter had seen and believed in Jesus' resurrection (verse 8). This time the word for "see" is *oraō*, which means, "to see with understanding." After this the appearances of the Lord began. Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene who arrived back at the tomb after John and Peter had returned to the city. Next He appeared to the women, then to Peter alone, then to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, finally, later that night, to all the disciples as they were gathered together in the upper room.

All the disciples who saw the risen Lord believed. But John believed first, and he did so before he actually saw Jesus.

**WHAT MADE JOHN BELIEVE?** What did he see that convinced him of Jesus' resurrection?

In order for us to understand what made John believe, we need to know something about the method of Jewish burial.

Every society has its distinct methods of burial, and this was as true of ancient cultures as it is today. In EGYPT bodies were embalmed. In ROME and GREECE they were often cremated. In PALESTINE they were neither embalmed nor cremated. They were wrapped in linen bands that enclosed dry spices and placed face up without a coffin in tombs, generally cut into the hillsides of Judea and Galilee. Many of these tombs exist today and can be seen by any visitor to Palestine.

There is another factor of Jewish burial in ancient times that is of special interest for

understanding John's account of Jesus' resurrection. The bodies were wrapped in linen cloths in such a manner as to leave the face, neck and upper part of the shoulders bare. The upper part of the head was covered by a cloth that had been twirled around it like a turban. This is how Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus buried Jesus. Jesus' body was removed from the cross before the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, washed and wrapped in strips of linen. 75 pounds of spices were carefully inserted into the folds of the linen (READ 19:38-40). These were dry spices. Aloes was a powdered wood like fine sawdust with an aromatic fragrance.

Myrrh was a fragrant gum that would be carefully mixed with the powder. Jesus' body was encased in these. His head, neck, and upper shoulders were left bare and a linen cloth was wrapped about the upper part of His head like a turban. The body was then placed within the tomb where it lay until sometime early Sunday morning.

What would we have seen if we had been there at the moment Jesus was raised from the dead? Would we have seen him stir, open His eyes, sit up, and begin to struggle out of the bandages? Not at all. That would have been resuscitation, not a resurrection. He would have come out in a natural body rather than a glorified resurrected body.

If we had been present at the tomb at the moment of the Resurrection John Stott (in his book, Basic Christianity) says we would have seen the body of Jesus seem to vaporize and be changed into something new and different and wonderful. He would have simply passed through the grave clothes and out of the sealed tomb, just as he would later pass through closed doors.

What would have happened then? The strips of linen would have sunken in once the body was gone, because of the weight of the spices that were in them and they would have been lying undisturbed where the body of Jesus had been. The cloth around his head might well have retained its shape and have been lying by itself separated from the linen cloths by the space where the Lord's neck and shoulders had been.

This is exactly what John says he and Peter saw when they entered the sepulcher. John was first at the tomb, and as he reached the open sepulcher in the dim light of early dawn he saw the grave clothes lying there.

There was something about them that attracted John's attention. First, it was significant that they were there at all. John stresses that point by putting the word "lying" in an emphatic position in the Greek sentence structure. We might translate, "He saw, lying there, the grave clothes" (verse 5). Also, the Greek word that John uses for "lying" *keimena* occurs in ancient Greek writings of things that have been carefully placed in order. So John is saying that he noticed that there had been no disturbance at the tomb.

At this point Peter arrived and went into the tomb. Peter saw what John had seen, but he was struck by something else. The burial cloth that had been around Jesus head was not with the other clothes. It was lying in a place by itself, separate from the linen. It was

"twirled about itself" and there was a space between it and the cloth that had encased the body (verse 7).

When John went into the tomb and saw this... he believed.

What did John believe? He might have explained it to Peter like this: "Don't you see Peter, that no one has moved the body or disturbed the grave clothes? They are lying exactly as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea left them.... Yet the body is gone. It hasn't been stolen. It hasn't been moved. Clearly it must have passed through the cloths, leaving them as we see them now. Jesus must have risen." John Stott says, "A glance at these grave clothes proved the reality, and indicated the nature, of the resurrection."

In the light of this evidence, how foolish the non-Christian explanations of the events of Easter morning seem.

Some critics have come up with the theory that the body of Jesus was stolen. But then the presence of the grave clothes can't be explained. They would have been removed with the body. Others have tried to defend the view that Jesus was not completely dead when he was taken down from the cross. He revived in the tomb, unwound the linen bands, rolled away the stone and escaped to convince his disciples that he had risen from the dead. But even if Jesus had survived, if he appeared to his disciples half-dead and desperately in need of medical attention, they would not have been prone to worship him as their risen Lord and be willing to die for their faith in his resurrection. Besides that the linen cloths would have been unwound, and the 75 pounds of spices would have been scattered around the tomb.

So none of these explanations will do. The disciples saw everything in order, but the body was gone. Jesus had indeed been raised, and in a resurrection body.

**APPLICATION:** What do these facts mean for us? We can make several applications from this account of Peter and John at the empty tomb.

The first is that God has provided us with perfectly adequate evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

First: The empty tomb, and the evidence of the undisturbed grave clothes

Secondly: The claims of those who saw Jesus between the day of His resurrection and the day of His ascension in to heaven.

Thirdly: The very origin of the Christian faith. Without the first disciples belief in the resurrection, Christianity would never have come into being. Peter proclaimed in Acts chapter 2: "This Jesus God raised up again, to which we all are witnesses...Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified."

The evidence is there. And the evidence of the grave clothes alone was sufficient to lead John to believe. God does not expect us to believe without evidence. He has given us

evidence. When we do not believe—assuming we have looked at the evidence—it is because we do not want to surrender our lives to Christ and acknowledge Him as Lord. Those who believe, have seen the evidence and have responded to it as God has enabled them to do so by His Holy Spirit.

The second lesson that comes from this passage is that the experiences of Peter and John at the tomb indicate that the body of the Lord was changed into a glorified body. In this body Jesus lives today, seated at the right hand of God the Father where He intercedes for His own until the moment when He will return again in judgement. Jesus died, but he died once for all. He was spat upon and cursed, and crucified but that will never be repeated.

Some people think of Jesus as a figure dying on a cross. Others see him in a garden praying or going around doing good. But none of these pictures is accurate for those who live today. Paul saw the Lord on the road to Damascus; but it was not the lowly Jesus he saw, it was the exalted Lord surrounded by light so bright it blinded him. John saw the living Lord triumphant standing among the golden candlesticks that represent the churches in Revelation. "His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters...His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead." We pray today to a powerful Lord, to an exalted Lord. He will return to the earth someday to take us to be with Him. He said in John 5: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and shall not come into condemnation but is passed from death into life....I tell you the truth, a time is coming...when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live....Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

Finally, the transformation of the body of Jesus Christ is a guarantee that the same thing will happen to us. He is spoken of as the first fruits of those who sleep. The first fruits were the first part of the harvest—offered to God as an act of thanksgiving for the harvest. That means that we, the harvest, shall be like Him someday when we receive our glorified bodies. (Read I Corinthians 15:50-54; and I John 3:1-3) Our resurrection bodies will be better than our old physical bodies. These bodies hamper us, they get old and sick and eventually they die. But the resurrection body will not be like the body we have now. It will be a powerful, glorious, spiritual body with no sin and no suffering and no pain and no death.

**CONCLUSION:** In one of his great sermons on the resurrection D. L. Moody tells the story of a young girl about fifteen years of age who was suddenly completely paralyzed on one side and nearly blind. She could hardly see, but she could hear. As she lay in bed one day she heard the family doctor say to her parents as they stood by the bedside, "She has seen her best days, poor child." Fortunately the girl was a believer, and she quickly

replied, "No, doctor, my best days are yet to come, when I shall see the King in His beauty." Her hope, like ours, was in the resurrection.

Ravi Zacharias has said, "Where there is no answer for death, hopelessness inevitably invades life." The wonderful thing is that in Christ we have the answer to the problem of sin and death. In I Cor. 15 we read, "O death where is your victory? O death where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

When you place your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who died for your sins and rose from the dead, you are saved: your sins are all forgiven and you are given eternal life as a gift from God. John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but through me." THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY! Have you come to Christ? I invite you to trust Him today!