

Behold the Empty Tomb – John 20:1-18 – April 16, 2017
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For Christians, here and around the world, this is our big day. A day of joy and celebration. A day of proclaiming "Hallelujah! He is Risen!" The solemnity and introspection of the Season of Lent is finally exchanged for festivity and elation. The anguish of Good Friday is replaced with exultation. This is the day when millions of Christians around the world are gathered together - to rejoice over nothing. Zero, zilch, nada. We celebrate an empty tomb – a cave left vacant – a burial site without an occupant. No body, no corpse. We shout for joy because the tomb was empty.

But it wasn't always like this. The empty tomb wasn't always a source of ecstatic joy. That first Easter morning so many centuries ago, the empty tomb initially elicited fear and grief. Gospel writer John tells us of that initial visit to the empty tomb. While it was still dark a lone woman was drawn there in her grief. A woman by the name of Mary Magdalene. What do we know about this Mary? From Luke's gospel, we know that she had been healed by Jesus. She and other women traveled with him and the disciples and provided for them.

In John's gospel, we first meet her at the cross. Mary Magdalene stood bravely at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother and his aunt and witnessed his death. And she watched as they took the body, wrapped it in linens, and placed it in a garden tomb.

For the followers of Jesus, it was all over. He was dead and gone. Nothing would change that fact. Some experienced shock that it had to end this way. Some were in denial. This wasn't the way it was supposed to turn out. We thought he was the Messiah. Others were angry, possibly vowing revenge against the authorities. And others still were simply overcome with grief.

Mary Magdalene grieved. She had lost someone very dear to her. A man who had cured her of a serious affliction. A man who saw that she and all woman were to be respected and honored, contrary to the culture. A man who was to her a teacher, a mentor, and her lord. A man who challenged all expectations. A man who stood against hypocrisy, prejudice and injustice. A man who dined with sinners and sought out the poor and the destitute.

Perhaps Mary Magdalene recalled that Jesus had often spoken of things that were otherworldly. Things that didn't seem to make much sense, but struck a chord of truth deep within her nonetheless. He spoke of God as if he truly knew the very heart of God. Perhaps she had wondered, are the rumors true? Is this the Messiah we have hoped for? Is he the one to finally lead us from our captivity? Certainly, he freed me from my own captivity.

And yet...just a few days ago, he hung on a cross, like a common criminal. Beaten and bloody, she had witnessed his final moments, while she stood there with his mother. She heard him say he was thirsty. She saw him bow his head as he died. She watched as the soldier pierced his side, the flow of water and blood affirming his death. And now he was gone. And she grieved.

So early in the darkness of the morning of the first day of the week, she came to the garden and approached the tomb. Her grief quickly turned to horror as she saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance of the tomb. In her mind that could only mean one thing. Someone had come and had removed the body. Nowhere in her mind did she even consider the remote possibility of resurrection. All she could fathom in her mind was an act of foul play. Someone took the body of her Lord.

Already was she in mourning, and now heaped upon that grief was this new blow. Someone swiped Jesus. She ran from the empty tomb, stumbling blindly in the darkness, tripping over her skirts, thinking only to tell someone of this tragedy. She found Peter and an unnamed disciple, known only as the disciple whom Jesus

loved. The men listened to her in her panic as she relayed the dreadful news. Without hesitation, the two men set out running toward the tomb. When they arrived at the tomb, they found only the linen burial clothes.

After the men left, Mary remained outside the tomb, weeping. Looking into the tomb, she saw two angels, who asked her why she was weeping. So caught up in her grief, she didn't even appear startled to see these angelic figures. She merely repeated her concern that the body of Jesus was missing, and she didn't know where they have taken it.

She turned away from the tomb and saw a man standing before her. John's gospel tells us it is Jesus. But for some reason, Mary did not recognize him. The man asked her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" He continued and asked, "Who are you looking for?" She assumed him to be the man who tended the garden and perhaps he had removed the body. She pleaded with him, "If you have taken his body, tell me where he is, and I will take care of him." She simply could not imagine the body of her lord in the hands of someone who cared not for him. She wanted him back. His corpse was all she had left of him.

At that moment, Jesus spoke only one word. And that was all it took. He said her name, "Mary." And at once her eyes were opened and she knew who he was. There's power in knowing someone's name. Jesus once told his disciples that he was the Good Shepherd. Referring to himself in the third person, he told them "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...and the sheep follow him because they know his voice...the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep...I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." To be known and called by name. God Almighty knows each of our names, knows who we are, and calls us as God's own.

Here Jesus spoke her name, and Mary's eyes were opened, and she was staring life in the face. She was flooded with emotion. Joy overwhelms her and she embraces him, holding on to him as if to never let him go. Thinking, if I hold on tight enough, I'll never lose him again.

We do this, too. Often when faced with grief or troubles, we long for the past or cling to whatever provides stability. "If only things could go back to the way they were." Why can't things just be like they were before...before we said those horrible words, before the affair had occurred, before we made that unwise decision, before our loved one had left us, before the illness had taken its toll, before wasting time in a destructive relationship, before spending all that energy pursuing all the wrong things, before holding onto anger and hatred, before neglecting those in need. Why can't things just be simple again?

But we can't live in the past. And Jesus told Mary, "You cannot hold onto me. Things have changed. My earthly life and ministry are finished, and I must return to the Father." He went on to tell her. "Things have changed for you, too, Mary. You have a job to do. Go to the brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." And Mary did as she was told, becoming the first person to proclaim the resurrected Lord. A woman, one who in that particular culture had no voice, was called to be the first witness of the resurrection.

Easter opens up a whole new set of realities. A future full of possibilities. When all hope seems to be gone, when life seems to have taken on its darkest moment, we are confronted with the empty tomb, the abandoned linens, and the call of the Good Shepherd. The exciting news is that Easter isn't just one day a year. Easter is every day. Jesus doesn't hang out in the tomb for 364 days just to pop out and say "howdy" once each year. The empty tomb is just that...empty. The Risen Lord is what is real.

Often we would rather stay in those dark places, refusing to let go of whatever is holding us from an encounter with the Risen Christ. We cling to what we know, attempting to retain some semblance of control over our lives, even when it keeps us in darkness.

A man was walking along a narrow path, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the cliff. Realizing that he couldn't hang on for long, he called for help. He yelled out "Is anybody up there?" A voice answered, "Yes, I'm here!" Relieved he cried, "Who is that?" The voice replied, "It's the Lord." The man begged, "Oh Lord, help me!" The voice asked, "Do you trust me?" The man responded, "Oh Lord, I trust you completely." The voice said, "Good. Let go of the branch." What?!" the man cried. Patiently the voice repeated, "I said, let go of the branch." There was a long pause. The man called out, "Is anybody else up there?" (Story found on the internet)

The only way out of darkness is to move into the light. For Mary, that moment came when Jesus spoke her name. She had been caught up in her grief, yet all that changed the moment she heard his voice. And at that moment, she let go of her grief, and her life changed forever. Her grief didn't disappear, like it never existed, but it no longer held the same power over her.

And Christ calls to each one of us, bidding us to let go of those things that hold us back, whether it is grief, or sin, or apathy, or prejudice, or worldliness. The Risen Lord calls us into fellowship with himself, to experience a life with him.

Friends, the tomb is empty, for he is Risen! Are you ready to encounter the Risen Christ? Are you willing to let go?