

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. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes, ¹¹ but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

The Life-Changing Power of the Empty Tomb

1. See how people come to the tomb
2. See how people leave the empty tomb

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Dear Christian friends, this morning we bask in the glow of Christ's victory over death. Today we join our brothers and sisters around the world who are traveling in spirit to the empty tomb where Jesus had been laid. And that isn't completely unique, is it? It is rather customary to visit the burial sites of loved ones to remember them, or to travel to the tombs of kings or other famous world rulers to honor them. However, to be honest, we don't even know the exact location of our King's burial. In fact, many Muslims ridicule Christian missionaries for this very reason. They say, "We have the tomb of our great prophet Mohammed, but you Christians have nothing."

And that is exactly the point. We rejoice in the fact that we have nothing. We don't make this journey to the tomb on Easter Sunday to honor the dead. We go to the tomb to worship our living God. Today we celebrate the life-changing power of the empty tomb. We may come to this tomb of Jesus with grief and guilt and doubt. But we leave this tomb with certainty and comfort and joy.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb of Jesus with grief and sorrow. Jesus had changed her life. Mary at one time had been possessed by seven demons. But Jesus had driven those demons out of her. This caused Mary to put all of her spiritual hope in Jesus. She held Jesus near and dear to her heart as a dear friend but especially as her Lord and Savior. But those hopes had seemingly been dashed on Good Friday. Jesus had been put to death. Mary watched in disbelief as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus buried Jesus on Friday night. Furthermore, to add insult to injury, Mary had gone to the tomb on Sunday morning and discovered that Jesus body was missing. Mary didn't know where to turn. All she could do was run to Peter and John and make the horrible report: **"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"**

Peter and John quickly set out for the tomb. Peter came to the tomb with guilt and shame. He had to have been contemplating the way he had boldly stated he would remain at Jesus' side to the point of death, but instead had denied even knowing him. Peter had been through so much with Jesus. He had walked on water at Jesus' side. He saw a glimpse of Jesus in his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. In spite of all Jesus had done in his presence, Peter had abandoned him.

Then there was John, the author of this Gospel, who refers to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved. He reached the tomb before Peter. At first, it seems John wasn't sure what to believe. We're told in another account that when the women first came and made the report about the empty tomb to the disciples, they regarded their words as nonsense.

These people characterize the way we sometimes approach God. Sometimes we approach God like Mary, with grief and sorrow on our hearts. Life seems so unstable at times. Things just keep going wrong. Relationships are strained. We see tragedy unfold. We see our dear friends and family die. We ask, "Why God? Where are you in my life?" Sometimes we approach God like Peter, knowing full well we have denied God in our lives. We have pushed God

to the backseat and out of his proper place of importance. Sometimes we approach God like John. We are skeptical about God and the promises which he makes to us. It seems too unreasonable or just too good to be true.

This morning, however, we encounter the life-changing power of the empty tomb. I don't know what you personally are bringing to the tomb of Jesus this morning. Maybe it's grief; maybe it's guilt; maybe it's doubt. The reality is, it doesn't matter anymore. Jesus did away with all those things when he rose from the dead. You can leave those things at the empty tomb of Jesus. This empty tomb transforms our lives and empowers us to live in the peace of God-peace which transformed the lives of Peter and John and Mary.

John left the tomb with a guaranteed certainty. He may have approached the tomb and peered inside with a skeptical heart. But he left the tomb with a heart filled with faith. John wrote this Gospel as an old man, probably fifty years after the fact. But he recalls the account like it happened yesterday. "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." The evidence overwhelmed John. He went in and saw the burial cloth that had been covering Jesus' face folded up neatly. He didn't fully understand that Jesus had to rise to fulfill the Scriptures. But he was convinced it was true.

We also can leave the empty tomb this morning knowing for certain that Jesus is risen. We have the evidence right in front of us in the inspired pages of God's Word. The Holy Spirit convinces us through the Scriptures that Christ's bodily resurrection is true.

Furthermore, the life-changing power of the empty tomb guarantees our guilt has been removed. It took away Peter's guilt and shame. Because Christ had risen, Peter knew the comfort of God's grace. The burden of his shameful denial was so great that we're told Peter left the high priest's courtyard and wept bitterly. But Jesus would not abandon Peter in his guilt and shame. Our resurrected Lord appeared to Peter on a number of occasions. In fact, Jesus would personally reinstate Peter and guarantee that forgiveness was his.

That guarantee belongs to us, as well. When Jesus died on the cross, he suffered the punishment that our sins deserve. Our guilt became his guilt. Jesus made the payment in full. Now, on Easter Sunday morning, God the Father is proclaiming to the world that Christ's payment is acceptable. He raised Jesus from the dead to ensure that our sins are gone. We no longer need to feel shame about our sins. It is as if they were never there because of our dear Lord Jesus.

That is a truth that can make us exceedingly joyful and glad. That is the life-changing power of the empty tomb. It turns our grief and sadness into joy and celebration. It's the joy that Mary Magdalene experienced. Mary's sorrow turned to joy when Jesus appeared to her. "Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her."

This Easter joy that Mary experienced is ours to experience as well. Jesus' resurrection from the dead assures us that the grief and sorrow we have in this world is only temporary. Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of our personal resurrection. Although our bodies suffer from the consequences of sin—we hurt, we get sick, we die—these things are fleeting. Jesus has promised us eternal life with him, where there is no hurt or pain or death. Only joy and peace and life. Live in that joy and peace right now. You can. Jesus has made you his own. That is the life-changing power of the empty tomb! Amen.