



THE NOT-QUITE EMPTY TOMB

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

Catalog No. 980

John 20:1-18

41st Message

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April 3, 1994

I recently heard a story about a preschool-age Sunday School class. It was two weeks before Easter, and the teacher was doing her best to arouse interest in the most sacred of all Christian holidays. She asked her class, "Does anyone know what it is that we will celebrate next Sunday?" There is always at least one student in every class who knows all the answers. Most of the class sat stunned, but the bright little girl answered, "Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem." "That's correct, Janice," said the teacher. "Now can anyone tell me what we celebrate the Sunday after Palm Sunday?" Again she was met with a sea of blank stares — except for you-know-who. The teacher acknowledged the hand of the little answer woman, who promptly responded, "The Sunday after Palm Sunday is Easter Sunday." The teacher should have left well enough alone. She pushed it further and asked, "What happened on Easter, Janice? Do you know?" "Oh yes, teacher. Easter is when Jesus Christ rose from the grave." "That's right," interrupted the teacher. But Janice wasn't finished. "Yes, and when Jesus comes out of the grave, if he sees his shadow, he goes back in for six more weeks, but if he doesn't see his shadow, he stays out!"

Easter is the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the central tenet of the Christian faith. As Michael Green put it,

Christianity does not hold the resurrection to be one among many tenets of belief. Without faith in the resurrection there would be no Christianity at all. The Christian church would never have begun; the Jesus movement would have fizzled out like a damp firecracker with his execution. Christianity stands or falls with the truth of the resurrection. Once you disprove it, you have disposed of Christianity.

It was the resurrection of Jesus Christ that changed the cowering disciples as they hid behind locked doors, transforming them into a band of champions of their crucified Lord.

Earl Palmer tells the story about an experience he had while he was in seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. Following finals one summer, he and three friends were returning home to the West coast. They drove straight through, each of them taking turns driving for a number of hours. At about 3 o'clock in the morning, somewhere in Iowa, the man who was driving had just gone by a gas station when he realized he probably should fill the tank. He made a U-turn and went back to the station to fill up. He then woke up Earl to take over driving, and he fell asleep without telling him he had made a U-turn. Earl drove out of the gas station and began driving back East. He drove for three hours before he realized he was going in the wrong direction. There were plenty of signs that should have alerted him to the fact that he was going the wrong way: mileage signs, road signs, advertisements, etc. When a Greyhound bus

went by with "Las Vegas" on the destination sign, he thought to himself, "they really should change those more often." But he ignored all the signs. Until he saw the sun rise in front of him, that is. He said, "When I saw the sun come up, that was too big a sign to ignore."

There have been many ingenious attempts to explain away the resurrection of Jesus. One theory, popularized in 1960s by the book, "The Passover Plot," held that Jesus fainted on the cross from the trauma that was inflicted on his body, the loss of blood, etc. When he was put in the tomb, the theory goes, the coolness of the burial place revived him and he got up and walked out. The disciples were so psyched up by this occurrence they accepted him as the risen Lord.

But there is a major problem with believing that Jesus merely passed out on the cross. He had been beaten within an inch of his life, and then he was crucified, a Roman form of capital punishment. He had been pierced by a spear. A Roman centurion, a man who certainly knew death when he saw it, had certified to the Roman governor that Jesus was dead. Even if the tomb was cool, he was without water for approximately three days. It is beyond belief that he would somehow get out of the grave clothes, push away a stone weighing hundreds of pounds, overpower two guards at the door, walk all the way to Jerusalem on feet that had been pierced by nails, and then appear to be a victorious, risen Lord. That would be a greater miracle than his resurrection.

Others have said that the disciples who came to the tomb that morning were mistaken in the darkness and came to the wrong tomb. Those who hold to this theory say that the man who was standing by the tomb, the one who said, "He is not here," actually was saying that Jesus was buried in another place. But those who say this don't complete the angel's statement. What the angel actually said was, "He is not here, he is risen!" It is unbelievable that the many people who were involved in the affairs of that Easter morning could have continued to go to the wrong tomb.

Other theorists say that belief in the resurrection of Jesus was a form of mass hallucination. The disciples so anticipated his resurrection they actually convinced themselves he had risen from the grave. But Paul records that more than 500 men and women at one time saw the risen Lord. Mass hysteria on that scale is unlikely. And furthermore, no one really thought that Jesus was going to rise from the dead. John clearly says that in the passage we will look at in a moment.

Others have said that the foes of Jesus stole his body. My question is, Why? If the foes of Jesus were trying to suppress the gospel, why would they do something that would support it? And why didn't they produce the body when the disciples began to preach that Jesus was risen from the dead?

Others say the apostles stole the body of Jesus. We have to ask the question, "Why then would they suffer death for their beliefs?" All of the apostles, with the exception of John, died martyrs' deaths. People will die for what they sincerely believe in, but rarely will they die for a hoax they perpetrated. These men went to their deaths firmly believing in the resurrection of Jesus, and the thing was preached all over the Roman Empire.

Without question, the early church fully accepted and believed in the resurrection of Jesus. Archeologists in Jerusalem have unearthed caskets of Christians from the latter part of the first century, thirty years after Jesus' resurrection. On the side of the caskets they found inscriptions written in Greek, Aramaic and Latin, things like, "Jesus, risen," or "Jesus, let him rise" — a prayer to Jesus for the resurrection of the loved one who was buried in the casket.

On what did they base their belief? What are the facts on which our Easter faith is based? John tells us in the 20th chapter of his gospel. He bases the Easter faith on a set of facts you might never have thought about. We begin reading at verse 1:

Now on the first {day} of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone {already} taken away from the tomb.

It was customary in those days to visit the grave of a loved one on the third day after burial. We don't know why, but there are symbolic indications in the Old Testament that the resurrection would take place on the third day. The Jews had a superstitious, not a biblical, belief that the soul did not depart the body until the third day following death. But for whatever reason, in Jesus' case the Jews did not come on the second day, but on the third. Mary, together with some other women whose names are given in the books of Mark and Luke, came to the tomb early in the morning, before it was light. They were not expecting Jesus to be risen from the dead. Rather, they came to anoint his dead body with spices, as we visit graves of loved ones and leave flowers. That was their purpose. They expected to see the body of Jesus lying in the tomb.

In those days, the graves of wealthy people were cut out of rock. The limestone hills around Jerusalem were easy to excavate, and tombs were cut right out of the rock. You can visit Gordon's Tomb, which is one of the traditional burial sites, in Jerusalem today. We are not sure if this rock-cut tomb is the actual tomb of Jesus, but it is one possibility. These tombs had a little chamber off to one side where visitors could sit and view the body. A slab was cut on the other side, with a ledge on which the head was laid. Half a dozen people could enter and view the body and anoint it with spices.

When Mary saw that the stone had been rolled away and she entered the tomb in the darkness just before dawn, she couldn't see very well. She became alarmed, because she thought the grave had been robbed — a common practice in those days. The graves of the wealthy in particular would be broken into and robbed of expensive articles buried with the loved one. This was a capital offense, but still it was done regularly. Mary thought the grave had been robbed and they had taken away the body of Jesus.

As I read that and tried to feel what Mary was feeling, I recalled the sense of violation we felt as a family a number of years ago after returning from a trip and discovering that our home had been robbed. It is a strange sensation to walk

into a room and see things where they shouldn't be and realize someone had been there. When Mary got to the grave, she knew with horror someone had been there.

We know that in the middle of the night there had been an earthquake, and the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb had rolled along the channel that was dug out underneath and to the side of the entrance. The other gospel writers describe the earthquake as the angel of the Lord rolling away the stone, *not to let Jesus out* (bear that in mind) but to let the disciples in, so that they could see that Jesus was risen.

"See" is the key word in this chapter. It occurs over and over again:

v.1: "Mary Magdalene *saw* the stone"

v.5: "John *saw* the linen wrappings"

v.6: "Simon Peter looking in *beheld* the linen wrappings"

v.8: "John went into the tomb and he *saw* and believed"

v.11: "Mary looked into tomb and *beheld* the two angels"

v.14: "Mary turned around and *beheld* Jesus standing there"

v.18: "Mary announced to the disciples, 'I have *seen* the Lord.'"

The emphasis in the chapter is on what people saw and what they believed as a result. Seeing the stone rolled away, Mary assumed that the grave had been violated and robbed.

Her hope grew dimmer as she raced to tell the disciples.

And so she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved [i.e. John. She went to Simon Peter's house and then to John's house, or wherever he was staying], and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

Together, these three raced through the darkness of that early morning on a ragged foot-race to the tomb. Mary, following along behind, having already run quite a distance that morning, probably had to stop to catch her breath.

Peter therefore went forth, and the other disciple, and they were going to the tomb. And the two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter, and came to the tomb first;

John, who was either younger or in better shape than Peter, outran his colleague. Three different times he points out that he ran faster than Peter.

and stooping and looking in,

This phrase is actually one word in the Greek text. It means "to squint, to peer intently" at something. It is the word Peter uses when he says that angels want to "look in" at what God is doing with the human race. James uses it of those who "look intently" into the Scripture. It doesn't necessarily mean to stoop down, but to look intently.

John sees the stone rolled away and he stops and peers in the hole. If Jesus was in fact buried in Gordon's Tomb, the hole is just a little low opening about waist high. John peered in, trying to see what was in the tomb.

he saw the linen wrappings lying {there;} but he did not go in.

What he saw was the lower part of the wrappings that had been wound around the body of Jesus. Bodies were not

embalmed then. They were covered with ointment and oils that had a resin base, and then wrapped in linen. At times a sheet was wound around the body, and then it was wrapped in linen strips, making it look like a mummy. The resin base and the ointment would soak through the bandages so that in a few days it would set up like a body cast, a hard, plaster cast. This was what John saw when he looked in — a cast. He probably thought he saw the body of Jesus. He was looking from the outside into the dark interior. Seeing in the cast the contours of Jesus' body, he probably assumed the body was still there, and that Mary was mistaken.

Simon Peter therefore also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he beheld [different word] the linen wrappings lying {there,}

Peter arrives, and in keeping with his rambunctious, go-for-broke style, brushes right by John and goes into the interior of the tomb. There he *beheld* the linen wrappings. This word means "to stare at" something. Peter did a double-take.

But he saw something else.

and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself [literally, wrapped together, by itself.].

Reading this, you might imagine that when Jesus rose from the dead, he tidied up before he left the tomb, taking the napkin that was over his face and putting it down neatly before he passed through the walls of the tomb. But no. That is not what John intends to convey here. What he actually saw was the bottom half of the linen wrappings, stiff and hard, like a plaster cast, from the neck down, following the contours of Jesus' body. Up where the head should have been he saw the linen wrappings that were intertwined and made into a turban. The turban was lying on the ledge, and lying on the slab was the plaster cast. There was nothing but thin air in between these two. Peter looked at the opening, and there was nothing inside the cast and nothing inside the turban.

John entered the tomb right after him.

So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb entered then also, and he saw [That is the same verb that is translated "understand" in verse 9. He perceived, he understood] and believed.

This was when the coin dropped for John. He looked at the linen wrappings which had covered our Lord's torso and legs, and at the head piece, and saw nothing in between or inside them. He realized that the body had not been stolen. No one could have removed the body out of the wrappings without tearing them all to pieces. He realized that Jesus' body had passed right through the wrappings! Suddenly, everything fell into place for John, and he understood. Maybe he said to Peter, "Don't you see, Peter? No one has moved the body or disturbed the grave clothes. They are lying exactly as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea left them on the eve of the Sabbath. Yet the body is gone. It hasn't been stolen. Clearly it passed through the cloths, leaving them as we see them now."

John says that up to this time none of the disciples believed that Jesus would rise again from the dead.

For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

The Old Testament predicted that the Messiah would arise from the dead. It was predicted in Psalm 16, the psalm that was quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost. The resurrection was predicted (Isa. 53:10). The disciples, who knew the OT well, just didn't see it. Jesus himself had said to the disciples on at least three different occasions, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will build it up again." But they did not believe this until after the resurrection. But when John saw the grave clothes, he believed it.

So the disciples went away again to their own homes.

Luke adds the statement that they were amazed. They were blown away. Imagine these two men making their way back home. For a while they didn't say anything, and then John said to Peter, "Did you see what I saw?" Peter said, "I saw it!"

There is only one explanation for the state of those wrappings: Jesus' body went right through them. John said to Peter, "I don't know about you, but I am a believer."

The next person to come to the tomb was Mary. She had been there already, before it was light. Mary had been one of the last people at the foot of the cross, and the first to come to the tomb. She was the woman from whom Jesus had cast out seven devils, and she was eternally grateful to him for that. If Peter is the leading man of the New Testament, then Mary is the leading woman. She turns up a dozen times or more as a follower of Jesus. Our Lord loved her, and she loved him.

But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb;

She must have missed Peter and John who had already set out for their homes.

and she beheld [that is the word "stare." She did a double-take] two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying.

We must understand that when angels appear in the Scripture, normally they appear just as men. They don't flap their wings and hum and float six inches off the ground. They look like people. There are exceptions, but normally they appear as human beings. So Mary is not too alarmed.

And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."

She is still thinking that someone robbed the tomb and stole the body of Jesus.

When she had said this, she turned around, and beheld [the same word as in v.12; she stared] Jesus standing {there,} and did not know that it was Jesus.

Perhaps her tears affected her sight. Perhaps it was still dark. She thought Jesus was the gardener, probably because the gardener would be the only one there that early in the morning.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away."

You have to understand what a breach of convention this was. In those days women didn't talk to men. They didn't talk to strangers, and certainly not to strange men. We can see something of Mary's distress in the fact that she spoke to this man whom she didn't recognize.

Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

You can't help but be reminded of Jesus' words in John 10, where he said, "My sheep hear my voice, and they know me, and they follow me." He knew Mary, and in the way he said, "Maria," she recognized him.

She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher).

John explains the word, because Mary uses the Gallilean dialect, which was used in Northern Israel, for "rabbi." One of the early translations indicates that at this point she ran to Jesus and grabbed hold of him. Hugging is not unusual for us, but women in that day didn't do that sort of thing, and they certainly didn't hug a rabbi, a teacher. She may have fallen at his feet and taken hold of them. We aren't sure exactly what happened, but she clutches him in some way.

Jesus responds:

Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren [the apostles], and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.'"

It seems that Jesus is being abrupt, that he is put off by what Mary did. But we must understand what he is saying. What he literally says is, "you must stop clinging to me now." Apparently Mary clung to him for awhile, and then he said to her, "Mary, we have to put a stop to this." Now there are various theological explanations given for why Jesus said this, but I think what he was saying was, "We both have to get on with some unfinished business. I have to ascend to the Father, and you have to go tell the apostles that I have risen from the dead. We need to get on with it."

And that is what Mary did.

Mary Magdalene came, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and {that} He had said these things to her.

Someone has pointed out that one of the marks of the authenticity of this account is that Jesus appeared first to a woman, and first commissioned a woman to preach the

gospel. In that culture it was highly unlikely that anyone would fabricate a story with a woman as a main character, because women were not considered to be credible witnesses back then. Their testimony was not even admitted into a court of law. They were regarded as chattel. Unless they came from the upper classes they weren't even considered human beings. But Jesus did not share these prejudices. He took women very seriously. It could have been anyone, Peter or John, for instance, who first came to the tomb, but it happened to be Mary, because Mary came seeking the Lord.

As Earl Palmer discovered on that morning when he thought he was driving West and the sun rose in front of him, the rising of the Son is a sign too big to be ignored. Historians accept as fact past occurrences for which they can produce but shreds of evidence. But the resurrection was attested to by hundreds of witnesses who saw Jesus Christ. They ate with him, talked with him, walked with him, and knelt before him. If the statements of those who testified to his rising cannot be accepted as conclusive evidence, then no testimony and no evidence can establish any truth in any age of history.

What was it that transformed a group of cowering disciples as they hid behind locked doors into a band of champions of their crucified Lord? Certainly not a dead leader. Only a living, conquering Christ could have done this. What power and influence changed the cross from an instrument of bloody torture into the most glorious and beloved of all symbols? The Romans crucified thousands of people before and after Calvary. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, no right-minded person would have glorified anything so hideous and repulsive as a cross.

It is that empty grave that gives hope to you and me this morning. It becomes our pledge that if we believe in Christ, we, too, will be raised. The great problems of the human soul find their solution at the empty tomb. In the resurrection of Christ we are assured that the short, perplexing life that is ours does not complete our destiny. The grave is not the end. We are not consigned to decay. With the great stone rolled away from the entrance of Jesus' grave, every doubt and every obstacle concerning our own eternity is removed. It was in a garden ages ago that Paradise was lost. It was in a garden in Jerusalem that it was regained.

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