

The Transforming Power of the Empty Tomb

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Let me invite you to turn to the Gospel of Luke. Our sermon text picks up at the end of Luke chapter 23 with Jesus' burial and then continues to Luke 24 with the empty tomb. As you're turning to Luke chapter 23, let me pray for us, and then I'll read the text. Let's pray.

Our Father, we ask that on this Easter Sunday, Lord, a strange Sunday, a unique Sunday given the global climate that we live in, we pray that you would still meet with us as we gather around your Word this morning.

Would you show us fresh things from these resurrection passages that we will look at this morning and help us to see afresh Christ risen and your Holy Spirit at work. Do a work in us now, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. So Luke chapter 23, starting with verse 50.

Now, there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man who had not consented to their decision and action, and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of preparation, that is Friday, and the Sabbath was beginning.

[1 : 3 9] The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed and saw the tomb, and now his body was laid. They returned and prepared spices and ointments.

On the Sabbath, they rested according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.

And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. But when they went in, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel.

And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.

And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles.

[2 : 5 1] But these words seemed to them an idle tale. And they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb. Stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves.

And he went home, marveling at what had happened. Well, I want us to consider this morning the transforming power of the empty tomb.

From the very beginning of the Christian movement, this was the surprising and revolutionary message that God had raised Jesus bodily from the dead.

Now, of course, Easter today is a time when we celebrate a lot of fun traditions, egg hunts, Easter baskets, chocolate, bunnies.

Earlier this week, I think it was Jimmy Kimmel, though, who said, you know, Easter doesn't feel all that exciting this year. Probably because I've spent the last three weeks driving around looking for eggs already.

[3 : 5 2] Jokes don't go as well with an empty sanctuary, but, you know, you're probably laughing at home. So Easter is a time when there's a lot of fun traditions.

But more importantly, Easter is that day when the church testifies that something happened in history, an event that has changed the course of human history, an event that will change your life if

you let it.

In fact, the Gospel of Luke shows us two transformations on that first Easter morning. The first happens to Mary and the other women in verses 1 through 9, and the second happens to Peter in verses 10 through 12.

And what we see here is that the resurrection of Jesus has the transforming power to fill even the most sorrowful heart with hope and even the most skeptical heart with wonder.

The resurrection of Jesus has the power to fill even the most sorrowful heart with hope and even the most skeptical heart with wonder. So first, let's look at the transformation of Mary and the other women.

[5 : 03] The sorrowful heart filled with hope. In verse 1, they come to the tomb carrying the spices and ointments they had prepared. Now these spices were for embalming the dead body of Jesus.

You see, by the time Jesus was taken down from the cross and his dead body laid in the tomb, the sun had already begun to set. And that meant that the Sabbath was beginning, a day when faithful Jews stopped their work.

So the women rest on the Sabbath, and they come back as early as they can after the Sabbath is over to do the honor of properly burying Jesus' body for its burial.

Now can you imagine the sorrow of these women? At the most basic level, their sorrow, of course, was personal. They had lost their teacher, their friend.

Jesus was the one they had eaten with and traveled with and listened to and laughed with. And now he was gone. But with the loss of their friend and their teacher, they had lost as well their hope, their dream.

[6 : 12] Jesus, after all, claimed to be the Messiah, the King who would set Israel free. The women had joined Jesus with the hope that God's long-awaited promise of liberation would finally come to pass.

And now, everything they had built their lives around for the last three years had been shattered. They hadn't just lost a beloved friend.

They'd lost their hope. They'd lost their dream. The story that they thought they were a part of, this story of God's liberating kingdom, turned out to be just another dead end.

Jesus was just another would-be Messiah crucified by the Romans. I think we can understand something of what those women felt that Sunday morning, maybe.

Many of our stories are being significantly rewritten by the global pandemic. For some of us, it's our economic stories that we thought we were telling ourselves.

[7 : 16] For some of us, our vocational stories. For others, our educational stories. These things aren't turning out the way we had planned. Some stories, even, are being tragically cut short.

The Harvard Business Review recently interviewed David Kessler, who's one of the world's foremost experts on grief. And insightfully, he said that what many of us are experiencing is anticipatory grief.

He writes that we feel there's a storm coming, and it breaks our sense of safety. And then he goes on to say, I don't think we've ever collectively lost our sense of general safety like this.

All of us, culturally, engaged in anticipatory grief. So we show up this Easter Sunday, many of us, carrying spices in our hands.

Because our plans, our dreams, some big, some small, have been shaken. And perhaps some of them have even begun to die. But notice how the women leave the empty tomb.

[8 : 34] They come with their spices of sorrow, but they leave with a message of hope. Their story at the empty tomb has been rewritten. No longer is it a dead end.

Now they have a purpose. Now they have a mission. And it's a mission brimming with energy and life. They come back to the rest with news. So what do they experience at the empty tomb that fills even their most sorrowful heart with hope?

Well, the angels tell them that this empty tomb means two things. One, it means something about Jesus. And two, it means something about them. So something about Jesus.

They tell the women, why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen. We could even translate that more literally. Why do you seek the living one among the dead?

Now for the last two chapters of Luke's gospel, Jesus has been called many things. A criminal, a blasphemer, an enemy of the people, a threat to Roman rule.

[9 : 41] In short, he had been condemned as one deserving death. Jesus was a dead man. But this verdict of death was not the last word for Jesus.

In the resurrection, the verdict of the world was overturned by the verdict of God. Jesus is the living one who cannot be held down by death.

And the empty tomb stood as a gaping sign that a hole had been burned through the gates of death. And the Son of God had risen in victory, proving that his words were true, that he is the king and will be forevermore.

Jesus was alive. And alive not merely in their hearts as an inspiring memory. Jesus was alive not merely in some spiritual way, but Jesus was alive bodily.

That's what the word risen actually means. And soon, even later that day, they would meet the risen Lord Jesus face to face. And he would eat with them. And he would drink with them. And they would see him with their eyes.

[10 : 55] And they would touch him with their hands. Why do you seek the living among the dead? He's not here, but has risen. What the empty tomb means is that Jesus has conquered death.

He lives never to die again. But because the empty tomb says something about Jesus, it also says something about the women. It says something about us.

The angels go on to say, remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.

Notice the word must. This was Jesus' divine mission. This was what he had come to do.

His death and resurrection were not an accident or a mistake or a plan B. Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus said that he had come to seek and to save the lost.

[11 : 54] And here at the empty tomb, we see how. You see, Jesus came to bring a liberation greater and more revolutionary than any of his followers had ever imagined.

Earlier in the service, we read from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. And there, Paul spoke of Jesus' resurrection as the first fruits. Now, first fruits were just that.

They were the first fruit of a harvest. It was the initial crop that told you what was going to happen to all the rest that was about to come. Along the edge of my backyard at home, I have a scraggly hedge that's about six or seven feet high.

And that whole hedge right now, pretty much still, is brown. It's monochromatic brown. Barely a leaf in sight. Except for one bush.

Off in the left corner, there's a blazing yellow forsythia. Just radiating yellow bright light.

[13 : 06] There it is. It's the first fruits of my hedge, as it were. Telling me what's to come. Telling me that soon there's going to be leaves. And there's going to be berry bushes growing.

And there's going to be all sorts of weeds. And then we're going to think, why didn't we trim this thing back when it was still all brown? Now we've got to take care of this massive thing. But the forsythia were the first fruits. Telling me that life was on its way.

The resurrection of Jesus, the living one, is the same. In Jesus, God took our humanity, flesh and all, into himself.

God came as close to us as possible in the incarnation. And then God in Christ went down into death.

Sharing our humanity down into its bitter end. And exhausted it to the full. But then, still united to our humanity, flesh and all, Jesus broke through death's bars like a tree breaking through the hard soil of winter, rising up to new life.

[14 : 24] The angels tell the women, must. Why must Jesus die and rise again? So that all those under the curse of death might rise with him on the last day.

What God has done in Christ is to pierce a hole through the thick dam of death. Don't our lives feel like that at times?

You know, we flow down the river of life and things seem good and things seem to be flowing well. But sooner or later, we hit the dam.

High, wide, thick, impenetrable death. And all of our life, then, just stops at the end.

A pool that goes nowhere. But imagine now standing before that dam that seems so immovable. And suddenly, you see a crack start to form.

[15 : 31] And then a single stream of water comes shooting forth right through the middle. Now, I'm not a structural engineer. But I know a thing or two, maybe, about that dam.

And the truth is, I wouldn't want to be downstream from that dam for long. Because what that seemingly little stream tells me is that sooner or later, that dam is going to crumble and come down. And a flood is going to be released. You see, the crack in the dam is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because death was not the last word for Jesus.

Death will not be the last word for anyone united to him. He has blazed a trail in our humanity through the last enemy, through death itself.

And so the women leave the tomb with hope. And so can we. We come to the tomb with grief.

[16:33] Some actual. Some anticipatory. We can leave with hope. Not a hope that we will never suffer. Jesus walked a road of much hardship.

And so may we. But we leave with a hope that even our darkest sorrows, even our heaviest crosses, will one day be swallowed up, redeemed in life.

Hope that our risen Savior has liberated us, not from temporary trials, but from the fear of death itself. Hope that nothing we face now can ultimately conquer us.

Hope that because Jesus has conquered sin and death, nothing can now keep us from the liberating love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Perhaps think of it this way.

If Jesus hadn't risen from the dead, if he had not risen from the dead, his life and his death would have ultimately been meaningless. Just another zealous, young, first century Jewish man cut down by the Romans.

[17:45] But the resurrection changes all of that. His life and especially his death now mean everything because of the resurrection. And you know, the same is true for us.

Because of the resurrection, our living and our dying, our joys and our sorrows in this life are not meaningless.

Our joys and our sorrows in this life will not, at the end of the day, just be swept away in the finality and absurdity of death. No, because Christ has been risen for us and because we will be raised with him, united to him.

Our joys and even our sorrows are part of a bigger story, a better story, the sweeping work of God in Christ making all things new.

The sorrowful leave the empty tomb filled with hope. And so can we. But you know, that's not the only transformation that happens here.

[18:56] The sorrowful are filled with hope. But we also see that the skeptical are filled with wonder. Listen to the end of our passage again. Now, it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary, the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles.

But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb, stooping and looking in.

He saw the linen cloths by themselves and he went home marveling at what had happened. You know, we often forget that the resurrection was just as hard to believe in the first century as it is today in the 21st century.

The message the women brought from the empty tomb sounded like nothing but an idle tale to the apostles. And I think we can sympathize sometimes with that today, can't we?

Now, in the first century, here's why the resurrection of Jesus was hard to believe. One, everybody knew that dead people stay dead. That was not something that humans happened to figure out in the Enlightenment.

[20:06] Dead people stay dead. Second, if you were not a Jew, the prevailing belief among Greeks and Romans was that the physical body was like a tomb. It was like a prison. It was something you wanted to actually escape, not something you wanted to come back in.

So the idea of a bodily resurrection was not really that desirable of an idea in the first place at first. Three, if you were a Jew, you maybe believed that God would raise up all people at the end of time, but not one person and not in the middle of time.

And so it was just as hard for them to believe as it is for us. They had all sorts of reasons not to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

But by the end of our passage, Peter's initial skepticism has given way to wonder.

He returns home, Luke says, marveling at what had happened. So what made the difference? What moved him from skepticism to wonder?

[21:15] Well, the difference was he checked it out for himself. He refused to close his mind around his preconceived ideas and the prevailing cultural prejudices, and he went to look at the

evidence himself.

Now, make no mistake about it. Then, as now, believing in the resurrection of Jesus means a shift in our worldview, but it's not a leap in the dark. Christianity has always claimed that the resurrection is a historical event, an event whose evidence we can consider for ourselves.

Perhaps the challenge for some of us this Easter is to do just that, to follow Peter to the empty tomb and to ask what really happened.

Perhaps having hope in the midst of sorrow sounds like good news, even great news, but at the same time, maybe it sounds like an idle tale. But think about it. Most of us have plenty of time on our hands these days.

Why not, in between streaming the latest episodes of Tiger Kings or whatever, why not take some real time and consider something that won't just entertain you, but will change you?

[22 : 34] There are lots of good places to begin your search. On our church website, we have a page called How Can I Know God? You'll find a couple of good resources there to get you started. Or maybe you could talk to a thoughtful Christian friend, figure out what resources they found helpful as they've grappled with this surprising message of Christ risen.

Ask them what brought them to change their mind about the resurrection of Jesus. But if you're going to take this step, then you need to be open to being surprised, just like those first disciples. Did you notice? None of them were expecting what they found. What Luke shows us here in his gospel and what all the earliest accounts of the resurrection show us is that the resurrection of Jesus took everyone by surprise.

You know, if I were writing the resurrection accounts, you know, if it was something I was just sort of making up after the fact, here's probably how I would have written the resurrection accounts. And then Nick, so full of faith in everything that he had been told, showed up at the empty tomb, expecting the resurrection of his risen Lord.

And they found it just as they had believed. But no, that's not what you find at all in the resurrection accounts. They're rifled through with this honesty, this intellectual honesty, that we came expecting nothing but a dead man.

[23 : 57] And it was foisted upon us. Even though Jesus had told us ahead of time, we didn't believe him. And it happened. Why did it take them by surprise?

You know, they knew perfectly well that if you followed someone who thought he was the Messiah and he got killed, then that was it. You know, in fact, we know of at least a dozen other messianic or prophetic movements that happened within a hundred years on either side of Jesus.

And they routinely ended with the death of their founder. You can go back and read the history of the first century, of the second century, of the first century before Jesus, and you find that there were messianic movements that happened.

And those messianic movements, the leader was killed. And then what happened? It was done. And we don't remember any of those movements, except for one. Christianity.

Christianity was different. Why? Why? Well, the answer that the followers of Jesus gave from the very start. In fact, the letter that we read earlier in our service was written, oh goodness, just a decade or two after the death of Jesus.

[25 : 07] From the very start, the answer that the Christians gave was that Jesus was raised from the dead. That's why they still believed in him as the Messiah.

Now, why in the world would they believe that? Why would they believe something so unprecedented, so contrary to their former beliefs? You know, and many theories have been advanced. Maybe they had a spiritual experience of Jesus after his death.

Maybe they felt his forgiveness in their hearts. Maybe it was sort of a result of cognitive dissonance. But the reality is, there was language for all of those things in the first century.

There was language for talking about spiritual experiences. There was language for talking about grief. There was language of talking about inner forgiveness. But that's not the language that the first Christians used ever to talk about what happened to Jesus.

So those theories, they just don't fit. Something unprecedented historically happened in the first century. What is the best explanation of the data?

[26 : 11] And he writes, a scholar who's written probably the most thorough scholarly work on the resurrection, puts it this way.

He says, the only way you can explain the rise of the early Christian belief that Jesus was raised is that there really was an empty tomb and they really did meet Jesus again in a transformed body. Then he goes on to say in that interview, of course, when I wrote a big book on this, my philosophy tutor from Oxford, who was an atheist, read it. And he said, great book. You really make the argument. I simply choose to believe that there must be some other explanation, even though I don't know what it was.

And then Wright replies, he says, he says, fine. That's as far as I can take you. I can't bully you into saying, therefore you must believe, because to do that requires a change of worldview. But once you change the worldview and say, maybe there really is a creator God.

And maybe this creator God really is sorting out this sad old world at last. Then everything makes sense in a way that it doesn't with any other possibility.

[27 : 26] Are you willing to be surprised by the evidence that God really has come to sort out this sad old world at last? To pierce a hole through the veil of death, to give us hope in the midst of sorrow, hope that death doesn't have the last word, and that life is not a meaningless pursuit.

Above all, that Jesus, the one who loved us enough to die for us, is the risen Lord of all. Are we willing to be surprised, or surprised again, by that great transforming power of the empty tomb? Because that's what it is. The transforming power of the empty tomb, it can fill even the most sorrowful heart with hope, and even the most skeptical heart with wonder.

So how about you? Will you let it transform your heart as well? Because if you do, it will change your life.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we pray that you would give us eyes to see the transforming power of what you have accomplished through the resurrection of Jesus, your Son.

[28 : 47] Lord, I pray that for many of us who are sorrowful in this time, you would give us a renewed grasp of hope that we have, because you have gone down into the darkest places where we could go, down even to death, and you have swallowed it up in victory.

Lord, help us to see that even these trials that we face in this day are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory. And would that make us people of hope and love in these tumultuous times?

And Father, I pray for those of us who are still grappling with the plausibility, with the truthfulness, Jesus, that you're raised from the dead. Lord, help us to be seekers after truth.

Help us to pursue what really is true and give our minds the openness to really consider and to be open to the fact, God, that you are real and alive and living and you love us enough to come and die and be raised for us.

Father, we pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.