

The Gospel of the Empty Tomb



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When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the *mother* of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might come and anoint Him. ²Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. ³They were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴Looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. ⁵Entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed. ⁶And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, *here is* the place where they laid Him. ⁷But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.'"

—Mark 16:1-7

Introduction:

People gather in places of worship all over the world on Easter Sunday, but what do we gather for? What's all the fuss about? Why do we gather and why does it matter?

This lesson will have three parts. In part one, we will consider the question: what is Easter? In part two, we will consider the question: what is the resurrection? What it is not, what it is and why it is important. And then finally, we will consider, what the resurrection says to us personally by unpacking the narrative in Mark.

Would you pray and ask God for a spirit of understanding and a heart to believe all that His Word declares? And may we together, come to the knowledge of God through the risen Savior.

Outline:

A. What is Easter?

1. Think with me first about the etymology (origin) of the word. What is the meaning of the word "Easter"? The word "Easter" can be traced back to two sources in both the Greek and English languages. In the Greek, the word is *pascha*, which also means *Passover*. In the English, the word comes from an Anglo-Saxon word which means *spring goddess*. The later term was used by unbelieving pagans to celebrate a holiday in ancient England. The former term describes the earliest and greatest annual festival of the Christian calendar.
2. Think with me secondly about the history of Easter. When did the tradition start? According to the Scriptures, Jesus died on a Friday and rose from the dead on a Sunday, and therefore the disciples and the early church began to observe Sunday right away as the Lord's Day—the day of corporate worship. However, in the late first and second centuries, men like Polycarp, Eusebius, and Justin Martyr spoke of a weekly commemoration, which was started in Antioch, that was intended to give special prominence to that Sunday which fell nearest to the actual Sunday when Jesus rose from the dead.

Over the years, many debates and church councils have gone back and forth about whether the church should follow the Jewish calendar or the Julian and Gregorian calendar. And this is why the dates are different for the celebration between the Eastern and Western worlds.

Historically, the ancient tradition of Easter Sunday celebrated the entire Passion Week—the week when Jesus entered Jerusalem before His crucifixion. Passion Week begins on Palm Sunday, and follows the events through the crucifixion of Jesus on Friday—called Good Friday, because it was on cross where the goodness of God was seen in the provision of His Son as a substitute for our sins—and concludes on resurrection Sunday, when Jesus rose triumphantly from the grave!

So, where did Easter eggs, Easter hunts, bunny rabbits, and chocolate covered marshmallows come from? These things are secular in nature and really have nothing to do with the historical and biblical festival of Easter.

3. Third, let us examine it biblically. Is the celebration of Easter found in the Bible and should Christians celebrate it? The answer to both questions is "Yes!" The Passover celebration is found in the Bible, however, as believers, we don't celebrate the Passover of the Lamb of God, we celebrate the resurrection of the Son of God by the power of God to the Glory of God! And this is why many believers choose to call Easter Sunday, Resurrection Sunday!

We've consider the first preliminary question, now let's consider the second:

B. What is the Resurrection?

1. What it IS NOT
 - A resurrection is not resuscitation. To be resuscitated means to bring back from unconsciousness. You may be playing on the basketball court and jump so high that

you hit your head on the rim, or you may simply be cleaning your home and slip, bump your head, and lose consciousness. Someone may come along, slap your cheeks a few times, put some cold water on your face, and you regain consciousness. But that is not a resurrection, it is simply a resuscitation.

In resuscitation the body is simply revived only to die again. In a resurrection, the body is never subject to death again. Although Lazarus and others were restored to life by Jesus, eventually they died again. But when we speak of resurrection, the Apostle Paul says, *"It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body"* (1 Cor.15:42). That is, never to be subject to decay and death again.

- A resurrection is not reanimation. You know what animation is don't you? Animation is what Walt Disney does with cartoon characters like Pinocchio. Or, what Pixar does with digital animation like the characters in Toy Story, Chicken Little, or Wall-E. They make them appear to have real life and movements like we do, but we know that they aren't like us, right? A resurrection is not animation or reanimation—where something is made to appear to have life or to have life-like responses.
- A resurrection is not reincarnation. Now there are some false teachers and false religions that will tell you when you die, you can live again in some other form or body, you can be "reincarnated," or that you can enter existence again in the form of another being. They tell you that what you become in the next life depends on your good works or your "karma" in this world. You simply keep going around, and around and around, through a series of births and rebirths. However, the Word of God declares something completely different in Hebrews 9:27 when it says, *"It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."*

As far as space is concerned, we can move up and down, right or left, backward and forwards. But as far as time is concerned, no one can go back in the past...we only move forward! And the Bible teaches that we are all moving forward to a time of judgment—not an endless cycle of births and rebirths.

- A resurrection is not the creation of a new body, but a transformation of the old body. In the resurrection you will not be given a new body in the sense that it will be unfamiliar to you and those who know you. Oh no! That would be the *creation* of a body, not the *resurrection* of the body. Job put it this way, *"Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God"* (Job 19:26). The hope of Job was that he would see God not in *other flesh*, but in *"my flesh"* he said. The Apostle Paul echoes this same thought in 1 Corinthians 15:53, when he says, *"For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality."*

2. What it IS

In the most basic and elementary terms, biblically, the resurrection does not just mean "the bringing back to life." The word "**resurrection**" (Gk. *anastasis*) actually means "the standing up of a corpse."

In the New Testament world, there were three philosophies concerning death.

- One was that the soul merged into deity at death.
- The second was that the soul is destroyed at death. This is the belief in annihilation, which says, since death is it, *"let us eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die."* (Cf. *Is.22:13; Luke 12:19*)
- Third, some held the belief that at death, your soul migrates into something else. This is what Middle Eastern religions and cults believe today.

Yet, all of these beliefs deny the *bodily* resurrection. This is why when Paul preached at Mars Hill (*Acts 17*), the crowd thought that He was bringing some strange teaching into their ears. So right up front, let us understand that when the Bible speaks about the resurrection it is not primarily a *spiritual* resurrection, but a *physical* one.

What this teaches us is this: the resurrection is not only concerned with your soul, but your body as well. The expectation of a bodily resurrection is the hope of the Christian. When Christ came to redeem sinners, that redemption applies to the whole person. Paul put it this way, *"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (*1 Thess.5:23*). And this resurrection will have some connection with and derive from our original body, but it will not be simply a resuscitation of the old body. It will be a transformation of the original body.

3. Why is this important?

Let me make it plain and straight: the resurrection is the most essential and entirely divine of all Christ's works.

- **John Calvin**—"The resurrection of Christ is the commencement of His reign."
- **Robertson Nicoll**—"The empty tomb of Christ is the cradle of the church."
- **R.A. Torrey**—"The resurrection of Jesus is the Gibraltar of the Christian faith and the Waterloo of infidelity."
- **Daniel Webster**—"The resurrection of Jesus is something to shout about. It is an explosive event whose fall-out affects the whole human race."

It stands out forever as the mightiest miracle and the deepest mystery connected to His redeeming work. The significance of its power is beyond all human conception or measure. For, if it be not true, the whole claim and promise of grace is confounded. But if it be true, that Jesus burst the bands of death and revealed Himself as death's conqueror, then all the claims He ever put forth are substantiated and all the promises He ever made are confirmed. Victory over sin and death and living a life of hope and power are possible now for those who believe. These are the notes of triumph sounded by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- It is important **to His person.** If Christ did not rise from the dead then He was a liar, for He predicted that He would (*Matt.20:19*). When the women came to the tomb that Easter morning, the testimony of the angels was, *"He is not here."* Yes, you laid Him

here, you left Him here, and you thought to find Him here just as you left Him, but you are happily mistaken. *"He is not here, for He has risen, as He said" (Matt.28:6a)*. It is fulfilled! Don't be shocked. *"Come see the place where He was lying" (Matt.28:6b)*. Why is this so important you ask? And the Scriptures declare that it proves who He really is! *"Who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord " (Rom.1:4)*

Look at these disciples fumbling and stumbling seeking to get a hold of the teaching of Jesus. He clearly taught them that He was, in fact, the Son of God and they saw glimpses of it, but they could not take it in. They could not understand it. But after the resurrection they were clear. Acts 1:3 tells us that *"He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs..."* The resurrection proved it for them once and for all. The grave has lost its guest. Death has lost its prey. It received Him, yes; but it could not hold Him, no. The confirmation is *"Come see the place where He was lying" (Matt.28:6b)*.

- It is not only important to His person, but it is also important **to His work**.

If Christ did not rise from the dead, then His work would have died and His church would have perished. If He lay rotting in some Palestinian tomb, then we have no Great High priest interceding in heaven for us. We have no Advocate at the right hand of the Father. We have no Head and Savior who might powerfully apply the benefits of His death to us. But this is not what the Word of God declares. Romans 14:9 says, *"For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be both Lord of the dead and of the living."*

- Why is the resurrection of Christ important? It is important **to the Gospel**.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul says, *"For I delivered to you as of first importance..."* There is nothing more important than this, Paul says. What is it? It is these two facts: *"that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."*

His death, fact one. His resurrection, fact two. These are the facts the Apostles preached. They did not preach themselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord (2 Cor.4:5). First, Paul says *He died*. He could not be raised from the dead if He had not first gone down among the dead and been one of them. His burial proves the reality of death. He didn't survive the cross, or merely faint and was revived later by the moisture from the tomb. No, no the crucifixion was no delusion. The piercing of His side with the spear was proof that He was dead. His heart was pierced and blood and water flow from His side.

See Him being laid in Joseph's new tomb just as the prophet said, *"His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death" (Is.53:9)*. And if He remained there, there would be no good news my friends. What can a dead Savior do for you? What hope would you have of life beyond the grave? How could you know that His payment was acceptable before the judgment bar of God? You wouldn't. There would always be doubt.

Here is the testimony of the Apostle: it is Christ Jesus *"who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel"* (2 Tim.1:10).

But if you reject this tremendous, glorious fact of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, then you will find that as you go through life, that fear that grips you every time you look at the news and hear the report of another death will come. You know that death is coming and you can do nothing about it, but you are afraid of it. You wonder, "What lies beyond it?" It is that place to which no traveler returns. You try to suppress the thought, but you can't escape it. So, you try to live right, but you fail. You make your resolutions, but you never keep them. You have good intentions, but you never put them into practice. You have tried, fasted, prayed, you have sweated, you have read the Scriptures, and done everything that you know to do, but the more you do, the more helpless you become. You see your own weakness, and you say to yourself, *"who will set me free from the body of this death?"* (Rom.7:24)

And here's where the good news comes in. Jesus says, *"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if He dies"* (John 11:25). I could go on and on, may God help to lodge these truths in your mind and heart.

The resurrection is important to His person, if Christ be not raised your faith is in vain, and you are still in your sins. It is important to His work. There is no mediator between God and man, no Great High Priest, no soon coming King. You're on your own. It is important to the Gospel. Believe the truth or the lie.

*Love's redeeming work is done
Fought the fight, the battle won,
Death in vain forbids rise
Christ has opened paradise.¹*

I must leave it there for now and move to the final heading: *what does the resurrection say to us personally?*

C. What does the resurrection say to us personally?

1. There is a REVELATION WE NEED TO SEE.

Explanation: When these women saw that the large stone had been rolled away, it had not quite dawned on them what happened. As they entered the tomb, they walked into what was sort of a vestibule, for the tomb was a very spacious excavation that was intended to serve as a family tomb. And upon entering the tomb, they were suddenly startled by the voice of a man who was in the tomb. But what frightened them even further was the fact that this man inside the tomb possessed a different appearance which indicated to them that this was no ordinary encounter! He was clothed with a *"white robe"* and these types of robes were worn by priests or other persons of distinction, but not young men. Then, Mark tells us that its color was *"white"* which is a Markian way of saying that this was no earthly figure, but a heavenly one.

¹ Charles Wesley, *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today*

Now for those who would suggest that this was some sort of apparition or vision, Mark dispels such foolish thinking by showing us that this being, this angel, actually understood their fears and spoke to calm their heart when he said, *"Do not be amazed"* (Mark 16:6). Literally, it means, "stop being alarmed...stop what you are doing and rejoice!"

The angel knew the purpose of their coming, so he addresses their hopes by saying, *"you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified"* (v.6).

The phrase **"you are looking for Jesus"** not only points out their purpose for coming, but it also has a strand of rebuke in it. Why had they come? They came with their spices expecting to find a dead body and to bring some type of closure to what, in their minds, was a tragic event. They were looking for the living among the dead! They were preoccupied with death, but all of their preparations left them unprepared for the reality they would encounter.

Application: Surely, this is true of many! You are looking for the living among the dead! What I mean is that you are looking for life in things which have no life. Jobs! Money! Promotions! Possession! Relationships! And yes, even in good and respectable religion! This is nothing new. The prophet Isaiah put it this way, *"Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?"* (Is.55:2). In other words, why do you search in vain, for what God offers freely? Why do you rely upon so many trifling things which yield no benefit, rather than on Him who is alive and mighty to save?

Oh, this is something that we who have met Christ ought to know. Yet, we forget and need to remind ourselves of this vital truth. There is no use of looking for deliverance in that which has no ability to deliver! Jesus is not enshrined in some dark tomb! Have you not read, *"it was impossible for Him to be held in [death's] power"* (Acts 2:24)? But these women spent much of their energy preparing for something that left them unprepared for this encounter! And so I must ask you, **are all of your preparations in life preparing you for the reality that you will encounter when you meet the living Christ?**

Have we followed the ancient word spoken by the prophet Amos, *"Prepare to meet your God!"* (Amos 4:12)? In all of your preparation in life, are you preparing your soul to meet God?

Now, in rolling the stone away, **what was the revelation Mark was intending to show us?** Well, surely it was not rolled away to let Jesus out! We know from John's gospel that the our Lord's resurrection body could walk right through door and walls (Cf. John 20:19ff). The stone was NOT rolled away that Jesus might come out, but it was that they might go in. It was not His means of exit, but it was the means of their entrance. It was not to give them a fact, but a demonstration.

The revelation of the empty tomb is more than a piece of history, it is also a pledge. The empty tomb is more than just news, it makes a promise—for God rolled away the stone, NOT that His Son might rise, but that we might know that He had risen!

Illustrated: Let me relax your mind with an illustration of what I am trying to explain. Suppose I put Joshua to bed one night and after I've prayed over him and kissed him good night, I turn the light off and begin to close the door. But the moment the lights go out, he

says, "Dad, don't turn out the lights, please, there is a monster in the closet and I'm scared." Now, I may be tempted to dismiss his childish imagination as foolish and tell him, "Boy, there is no such thing as monsters, go ahead and go to sleep." But because I care about his peace of mind, I take another course of action instead. I walk over to the closet and slide the door open and turn on the lights so that he can see that all of his fears are groundless. Then, I smile at him and say, "See, son, there is nothing to worry about, there is nothing to fear."

Do you see what I am illustrating? My opening of the doors is not done to remove a monster from the closet, but to remove the fear from his heart and mind. By doing it this way, what I have done is come down to his level so that he might find peace of mind. And what is the reward for me? I am rewarded by seeing him close his eyes with a look of peace on his face as he falls right to sleep.

Now this is what God revealed to us at the empty tomb! This is what God was doing. Rolling the stone away wasn't necessary for the resurrection of Christ Himself, He could've walked right through the stone. The empty tomb wasn't necessary that He might rise, it was that all might know that He had risen so that you can have peace of mind and find rest of soul! Here is the revelation of the empty tomb: He is risen! Christ the Lord is risen today!

2. There is an INVITATION WE NEED TO ACCEPT.

Notice carefully that the invitation to come and see the place where they laid Him, is preceded by a connection between the One who was crucified and the One who is risen!

- **Verse 6**—*And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him."*

Explained: The angels invite these women to consider not some mystical, or spiritual Jesus who appears as some phantom, but the same One who died by a crucifixion they witnessed and who was buried in a place that they witnessed. This same Jesus has now been resurrected.

And what this is meant to teach us is that there must always be a connection between the historical Jesus and the resurrected Jesus. For the Jesus of history is the same Jesus of eternity! He is the only Jesus that there is! The One whom the angel invites them to know is the One whom they have known. The same Jesus who died bodily, has been raised bodily! This is the good news! Yet, in inviting them to "*behold the place where they laid Him*" three things are taught to us...

Applied: First, the invitation is not to just come and consider the facts, but to come and encounter the living Christ! You see the writers of the New Testament are never interested in only the proofs of His existence as much as they are with an encounter with the resurrected Lord. Why? Because it's an encounter with the living Christ, not with an empty tomb, which produces faith.

Now let me be quick to say that **faith** is based upon historical facts, and no one who has ever denied the facts of the death, burial, and the bodily resurrection of Christ had the assurance of eternal life. You recall that it was Hymenaeus and Philetus who distorted the doctrine of the resurrection and led some astray from the faith (*2 Tim.2:17-18*). So we must understand that the old doctrines are not to be refined or spiritualized in any manner. We are to be witnesses of the literal facts. But it is not the empty tomb that proves the resurrection, it is the resurrection that makes the empty tomb meaningful. The empty tomb invites all to come and encounter a living Savior, not the memory of a dead man. The Gospel doesn't send you to a crucifix and the image of a dead Savior, but to an empty cross and an empty tomb! It invites us to come and behold Him who is alive and "*able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them*" (*Heb.7:25*).

Second, the invitation is not to just come and see the tomb, but to come and recognize the triumph of Christ. Oh! this is the tragedy of so many who come to church and sit under the Gospel every Sunday morning! These women saw all *the signs of triumph*—the stone rolled away, the empty tomb, the presence of angels—yet, they misread them all.

Mary and the others thought they had lost Christ, when in fact they had found Him more fully than they had ever known Him before. The invitation was not come and see defeat, but come and recognize the triumph of Christ!

I know people challenge this claim and say, if Christ is in charge why is the world as it is? I know unbelievers and skeptics point to the condition of the church and the weakness of those who follow Christ as a case for their unbelief. But let me assure you, they are doing nothing new! People have always questioned Him and His mission. But let us, and the world, behold Christ as He is now! Look at Him and judge Him in the book of Revelation, crowned with many crowns! He is on the throne! Hosts of angels bow at His feet! Empires and kingdoms have come and gone, but He rules over a kingdom which remains today in the hearts of millions of people!

Yes, people make look at and say that we are weak and even despised! But why are we not defeated, annihilated, crushed, and wiped off of the face of the earth? It is because death cannot terminate us, because it did not terminate Him. The saints who have come before us have not perished, they have just fallen asleep. Our fellow soldiers who have fallen are not dead, they have just vanished from our sight for a little while. But if we would just draw back the curtain that stands between time and eternity, we would see every one of them standing by His side, clothed with white robes, unharmed, blameless, holy, undefiled! Why? Because they share in the triumph of Him who Paul says is "*raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him*" (*Rom.6:9*).

It has been said that "death is the great leveler, it reduces the exalted and the lowly to the common denominator of dust." But the invitation of the empty tomb is to come and recognize that death is no longer a cave, but a tunnel with a light at the end. Death is no longer a cul-de-sac, but a highway, a superhighway in fact, to lead you into the presence of Jesus for those who are His own.

Are you His own? Do you belong to the people of God? Who are these people you ask? They are those who believe. They are those who see that His death was not a death for His own sin, but for ours. They are those who see that He ever lives to save those who draw near by faith. They are those who say: wherever He leads I'll go, whatever He says I'll do, I am not my own, I belong to You. Is this your testimony?

Recap: What does the resurrection say to us personally?

It says, there is a revelation we must see—He is alive.

It says, there is an invitation we need accept—come and live.

Finally, the resurrection says to us personally...

3. There is a COMMISSION WE MUST OBEY.

Right away, we discover that the announcement of the good news which brought awe and wonder, was coupled with a task.

- **Verse 7**—*“But go, tell His disciples and Peter, He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you.”*

First, we discover that the resurrection placed a command upon these women. They were to go and tell. In other words, their knowledge of the truth called for an action. God does not disclose the resurrection to them without a purpose. The resurrection enlisted them to be witnesses of the good news. It is no different for us. It doesn't matter whether you are a man or woman, young or old. If you have come to know and believe that Jesus is risen, then you have also been given a command by God Himself to tell others of the greatest news that has ever come upon the world!

This command to go and tell comes to you regardless of gender, but **second, we discover that this command comes to you regardless of your past failures.** The command to go and tell His disciples and Peter was not to single Peter out as the prominent one among the disciples, but a message to assure him that although he had failed the risen Lord, God's plan still included those in His church who have failed Christ.

Oh, what a word this is for those of have fallen! God completes His plan for the church despite human failure, but it includes those who have failed in order that God's perfect patience and mercy might be put on display. (*Cf. 1 Tim.1:16*)

Finally, the command of the empty tomb includes a promise of His presence. *“He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you.”* What a promise! But don't miss the point of it all. The resurrection is not a promise to erase all your fears and the signs of the empty tomb will not produce faith to believe. Even a visitation of angels will fail to produce faith. Listen, dear friends, faith comes by hearing the Gospel and having a personal encounter with the One who is risen from the dead. You must still follow Jesus. It is not enough to contemplate doing so. It is not enough to stand on the sidelines and watch as others step out in faith. There is no magic involved. You first hear His promise in His Word. You admit you have no power to follow Him in the strength of your own life. You cry out for resurrection power! Then you deny yourself and follow Him! And here is the

promise: "I will be with you until the very end of time" (Cf. *Matt.28:20*). I will be with you and in you, disclosing Myself to you, making My home in your heart! Go and tell, the world that Jesus Christ is no longer dead! He is risen!

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