

St. Mark's Ev. Lutheran Church
Flat Rock, Michigan
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April 8, 2012
Easter Sunday
Mark 16:1-8

"The Empty Tomb – A Place of Life!"

It's coffin commercialism. Those who want to make a final statement about their life can now choose customized, personalized, caskets to tell their story. Business is thriving at the Whitelight Casket Company of Dallas, which has introduced the "art casket" for those who wouldn't be caught dead in something routine. No longer must the discriminating consumer choose merely between a traditional wooden box and a boring bronze coffin. If you are golfer, you might chose the popular "Fairway to Heaven" mode; other popular styles of personalized caskets include a beach scene, the New York skyline, or a model portraying a postal package that says in bold, red letters, "Return to Sender."

Does that sound like a novel idea? The truth is, individualized coffins are personalized "final statements" are not so new after all. Many ancient cultures, including the Egyptians, for instance, were masters of this practice. Tomb preparation began long before a person's death, with craftsmen engineering a coffin to make a statement revealing what that person had accomplished in life, especially in preparation for impressively meeting the gods – at least that's what some Egyptians believed. Others dreamed of an afterlife for everyone like a calm, everlasting picnic on the sunny banks of the Nile, while still others planned to be reincarnated into a fresh body and begin another earthly life. Sounds like a contemporary syllabus of a college course, doesn't it? What was once coffin confusion is still around today – but not for us. Easter morning for us injects a rock-solid conviction into the confusion about life and death: the tomb of Jesus Christ is empty. This unexpectedly empty tomb is God's final statement to a questioning world. But what does it mean for us today?

We aren't interested in more empty caskets, so it's hard to see the significance of Jesus Christ's tomb echoing with emptiness. No decorated pillars or towering pyramids mark his gravesite. No cave drawings tell his story. No golden trinkets were buried with him to indicate his royal power. There was just an empty tomb. That's because God has decorated his Son's death and celebrated his Son's accomplishments in life not at his burial place but in his believing people – us. Just as Jesus Christ is risen from death, so we are raised up from spiritual and physical death, from dullness and despair to a life filled with vigor to take on yet another week with confidence in the strength God provides and filled with vitality to smile through good times and bad, through life and death with the sure hope of God's help. *Jesus' empty tomb is a place of life for us.* Today let's listen to an angel try to explain that to some saddened women and to us.

The sunrise was waking up their corner of the world, but these women were so tired, so exhausted from the bustle of the Passover and so emotionally drained from recalling the events of the past two days that suddenly snatched away their Master's life. Look at their emptiness: arms full of spices to anoint a dead body, eyes full of tears, hearts full of disappointment and fear. Listen to their low expectations: "We won't be able to roll the stone away," says the mother of James. "I heard there are soldiers guarding the tomb; they will probably turn us away," sighs Salome. "Why did God let this happen?" sobs Mary Magdalene. But when the droopy faces of these dreary women slowly tilted up to take their first look at the tomb, there were no guards standing watch (gasp!), the stone was rolled away (gasp!), and when the women speedily shuffled into the tomb to investigate, they saw a young man sitting inside dressed in bright white (gasp!).

"Don't be alarmed," (vs. 6) this angel told the women before they could drop their spices and run as if they had seen a ghost. With half-calming reassurance and half-caring rebuke, the angel announced, "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified" (vs. 6). The half-hearted women came looking not for Jesus, the almighty Son of God who can do anything, but

for Jesus, the humble Nazarene carpenter's son. They came looking not for Jesus, the Lord of Life who had already demonstrated his power over death by raising dead people to life, but for Jesus, the unjustly killed victim of a political conspiracy. No matter how much Jesus had told these women and all his followers that he would die an ugly death – but that death couldn't harm him because he would rise again to life in three days – they still expected much less. The angel lifted their heads and hearts back up to higher expectations by pointing them to the place where a dead Jesus would be, but was not. "He has risen! He is not here" (vs. 6). There was nothing to be alarmed about, nothing to be afraid of, nothing to allow low-level expectations. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! Empty hearts and lives are now filled with new expectations, new dreams, and new hopes! Ladies, now drop your spices (you need them no more!) and run for a better reason, to announce to the world that your Savior reigns over sin, death, and the grave, and Satan has been defeated, just as he said. His empty tomb is a place full of life for you!

Like these women, our lack of faith and our low level of expectation disappoint our great and mighty God for whom nothing is impossible. He's ready to help us move mountains, and our droopy faces don't look past the bumps in the road. All of it is a natural reaction. Not anymore, fellow believers, because our risen Jesus won't have it! His empty tomb is a place of life for you – a life filled with higher expectations.

Stop expecting to feel only sad and separated because your Christian loved one is dying, or died before you wanted – the empty tomb raises your expectations to anticipate a glorious reunion in heaven: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men," Paul exhorts us in 1 Corinthians. "In Christ all will be made alive" (15:19,22). Stop expecting yourself to act like a second-class misfit who can't compete with sin's power and may as well continue giving in to that same temptation. The empty tomb raises your expectations to a David-like approach to giant obstacles in God's way, facing them with confidence, and stepping up to Satan to announce, "Your wickedness cannot have its way with me." That, according to the Bible, is true because of the resurrection. "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above,...not on earthly things" (Col. 3:1,2). The resurrected, glorified body of Christ passed through the burial clothes and the tomb itself without friction only to appear shortly thereafter in physical, visible form. If God can do that, can't he also change your circumstances to pass through another week without harm? Let's stop expecting from God only an occasional sunny day, relatively good health, and tasty food on the table during the week. He can make the impossible happen. Jesus' empty tomb guarantees for you a life filled with higher expectations, and also a life filled with meaningful contributions.

A caterpillar spins its cocoon and takes its last look at the bright world for a long time. Its creator then transforms it from a slimy, little worm that crawls on the ground into a soaring, beautiful creature of the sky. It's traditional in the Easter season to use the butterfly as a symbol of the physical transformation our bodies will undergo on judgment day. It's also fitting to see in the butterfly our spiritual transformation, which has already taken place – all because of God's work connecting Christ's resurrection with our baptism. The Bible says: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Ro. 6:3,4). Easter gives us a sure hope of glorious things to come; more than that, it gives us a new life right now. We are not caterpillars; we are butterflies. Jesus' empty tomb means full life for us.

In case the women were considering staying at the empty tomb and chatting about this thing that had happened, the angel got them going: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (vs. 7). Wait a minute. Why not send these women back to knock the socks off Pontius Pilate, King Herod, or the Jewish leaders who put Jesus to death? Why go first to a few fishermen and a tag-along tax

collector? Because these men, Jesus' disciples, had fallen further than the others. They were so close to Jesus at one time, but then they fled from him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter even went on to deny him. They had since then disbanded, according to later accounts in the gospels, like Thomas' absence and Jesus appearing to only seven of them at the lake. In their minds, they were no longer worthy of bearing the title "disciples," rather, something like "traitors" or "underachievers" would be more fitting. But Jesus, who still calls them his disciples, wouldn't have it. Jesus is more interested in reassurance than revenge. He takes on a personal concern for these friends of his and wants them all, especially Peter who denied him, to know that he will still faithfully fulfill his promise to meet them in Galilee. There, in Galilee, Jesus will have a secluded location to restore them, reappoint them, and release them to work for him. The new life we celebrate at Easter is about a new glorified life in eternity, but it's also about a new spiritual life for those who think they might have failed so miserably that Jesus would no longer want them. But in love he does.

It's no secret that this sanctuary today is filled with people who have disappointed and deserted Jesus. Let it neither be a secret (it is Easter, my friends) that the resurrection of Jesus Christ means a fresh start for us all, just like the disciples. It means the bright morning of a new day when "the Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people" (Isa. 25:8). Have you been lacking in your worship attendance? Then know that your risen Jesus offers you a fresh, forgiven start to rise up and live anew in a greater appreciation for praising your Savior and hearing his Word every week. Have you been less than willing to give up your selfish desires? Then know that your risen Jesus offers you a fresh, forgiven start to rise up and live anew in a Christlike attitude of humble submission and service to others. Have you been limiting your Christian attitude and actions because it might cause you embarrassment? Then know that your risen Jesus offers you a fresh, forgiven start to rise up and live anew in a life that passionately practices and professes your Christian faith so that others do notice you have a higher allegiance.

This is God's final statement to the world, not a burial place decorated with the trinkets of this earth, but a believing people decorated with the treasures of heaven – his love, power, and life. Don't be caught dead in anything else. Amen.