



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Empty Tomb, Full Life!” Luke 24:1-35

Here we are. We’ve made the journey through Lent with Jesus. We’ve joined with Christians from other Auburn churches on Wednesday nights, enjoyed each others’ worship traditions, and listened to God’s Word around the theme, “Were You There?” The pastors were hoping that each of us would find ourselves connected to Jesus’ cross, through the characters that we met, week by week.

Were you there? Have you journeyed with Jesus through his last weeks of ministry, through his Passion, to his cross, and to the grave?

And today, we celebrate the greatest of good news. Death does not have the final word about life! God has more in store—for Jesus—and because of Jesus, for his followers, too! Empty tomb! Full life!

Judy Meyers, of Johnston, Rhode Island wrote, “I have always enjoyed asking my children what they learned in their Sunday School class. My oldest daughter, then five years of age, came up to me after an Easter Sunday service and I began to quiz her. She was quite excited and willing to tell me the whole story. She told of the death of Jesus and how he was buried in a tomb. Later an angel came and looked in the tomb and asked Jesus what He wanted. ‘I want out of this hole,’ Jesus said.”

Hear the story of God’s triumph over death, through the raising of his Son. We are in Luke’s gospel, chapter 24. Luke is the third book of the New Testament. Find chapter 24, and listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read to you the resurrection account from Luke. [*Luke 24:1-12 only*]

The women were going to do another piece of “women’s work”, putting Jesus’ body away properly. There had been a rush to get his body down from the cross before sunset on the day he was executed; sunset would mark the beginning of the Sabbath, in Hebrew time. The Law of Moses required that someone killed for a capital crime had to be buried within 24 hours, and another part of the Law prohibited any work on the Sabbath. Even in these extreme circumstances, Jesus’ faithful Jewish followers had been trying to observe the ordinances of God. I was impressed by that.

But now that Sabbath was over, and these women have gathered up the spices and perfumes that would keep down the stench of the body for a while. This tomb in which Jesus had been placed—all the records show it belonged to a man named Joseph from the town of Arimathea.

Joseph had given Jesus and his followers a very generous gift. This rich man’s tomb was probably cut into rock, providing a small chamber and one or more shelves inside on which to

put a body until the flesh rotted away and the family could claim the bones to put in a bone box. This Joseph would have hired craftsmen to chisel out the tomb in the rock for him and his family, and the same workers would have shaped a big rock to cover the doorway. That rock was roughly round, and a trough was cut right at the doorway, so that the rock would drop into place.

Dropping the rock was the last thing people did after they put the body inside. It would be almost impossible to remove the rock without several big guys on hand to roll it uphill out of the trough together. People on a grave-robbing caper—after all, this was clearly the tomb of a rich family, and who knows what they might find inside—they would need a pretty big gang to open the door, and a gang like that would draw attention. Legitimate visitors who came to grieve over their dead relative would mourn outside; they would not expect to actually open the tomb until enough time had passed that they could collect the bones, and then they'd hire some workers to deal with the door. These female followers of Jesus who had come this morning had helped carry Jesus' body from the cross to this tomb, among other tombs in the wealthy cemetery. They would know just where they were going early on Sunday morning, the first day of the Hebrew week. And they expected to find the rock blocking the door; they knew would have to find a bunch of guys to roll it out of the way once they arrived.

But like a family coming home to find their home ransacked, these women arrive and find the stone rolled away, and the body gone. Some of the burial cloths were left behind, but the body was not there.

What were they to think? *Grave robbers?* Those guys would have been severely disappointed, for nothing of value was buried with this poor peasant from Galilee. So why would they want the body at all? Handling a body made you ritually unclean, excluded from Temple worship or Sabbath at synagogue until a purification ritual had been performed. These women just don't have a category in which to fit what they are seeing.

So God shows up, in the form of two angels (Luke likes "twos" when it comes to witnesses about God). "He has risen," say these messengers. "He told you about this when you were together up north in Galilee, remember?" And then Jesus' words came back to them. Their attention had been totally focused on the tomb in front of them. But the angels help them open their eyes to the bigger story that has been unfolding over some three years' time, and will be the start of a whole new connection with God, for all people.

The women are only too willing to tell this incredible—literally, incredible—story to the others. And—being women, in that culture—their tale is immediately dismissed. "Get away from us, crazy ladies!" the men say. Except Peter—impetuous Peter; he gets up and goes to the tomb. Just as the women said, it's open. He sees the leftover burial fabric wrappings. But he doesn't get any angel explanation. He's left in his own befuddlement.

You may know, Mark's gospel ends at this point, with the empty tomb. That's it. But Matthew and Luke and John continue with more of the story. Listen to verses 13-35. *[text]*

Two of them—two disciples—are leaving town. It's been too much. The arrest, their escape, Jesus' trials, his scourging, his crucifixion—it has been a terrible week. And now, someone's taken the body. They truly have nothing left. Everything has been turned upside-down. But they don't yet know the half of it!

They don't recognize Jesus; Luke says they were kept from recognizing him. A number of psychology of perception experiments have shown that if you don't expect to see something, you don't see it, even if it's right in front of you. And in their agitated state of mind, it would be even more likely these disciples would not imagine it could be Jesus, so they didn't recognize him.

And their story to this stranger—it's just a jumble of things without a smooth order, which suggests to me this is a genuine record. (Perhaps Luke has talked with this Cleopas, himself.) They call Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet. They hoped he would be the one who would deliver Israel—the same exciting Messiahship scenario that almost everyone in Jerusalem expected during Passover while Rome ruled. But clearly, these men—and virtually all of Jesus' followers—had been badly disappointed. Jesus lost.

The stranger on the road knows all about this, after all. And he knows even more. He begins to link up Scriptures from the Hebrew Bible that point to what their Jesus did, and what their Jesus suffered. These disciples are rocked yet again!

Now it's getting dark, and they have reached Emmaus, and they invite the stranger to have supper with them. This is more than typical Middle Eastern hospitality; they can't get enough of what this guy is saying to them. He's confusing and electrifying them at the same time. It's like if you accidentally grab a live electric wire, your muscles tense up, and you can't let go of the thing. They've got to get all they can from this guy.

Then, at supper, this guy does a very "Jesus thing"—he breaks the Passover matzo bread in the same way Jesus had done in that upper room. And now they know. They know! And suddenly, he's gone.

Even though it's dark, they have to go now to tell the others. They go out on the road—willing to risk attack or robbery—because they've got to get back to Jerusalem, *now*! They pick their way back along the road, saying, "Lord save us! That was awesome—I never put all these things together like that, before! I feel like an idiot. I couldn't get it—he had to appear to me to open my eyes to what he's been saying to us, all along!" And when they got to Jerusalem, they added their story to what the women have said.

If you were raised in the church, perhaps you've heard this story 30, 40, 50, 60 or 70 times—even 80. There's a sameness that can creep in; "Oh, yes, another resurrection day. The tomb is empty."

Have you seen the commercial for the California Lottery, where a family is watching TV as the Lottery numbers are drawn? The father has a ticket in his hand, and as each number is called out, he gets more and more excited. "Got it! Got that one, too!" The final, "mega-number" is next, and there's a dramatic pause. The final number is called, and the father lets out a yell, and his wife grabs him and squeals in joy, they start hugging each other and jumping up and down. Meanwhile, the camera catches the two kids, who have the most bored looks on their faces. Then, the daughter gets up, goes to the VCR, pulls out a tape cassette, and plops it on top of the unit, and slinks out of the room. "Boy, that never gets old!" exclaims the father, as the camera rolls back to reveal that the family has been sitting in a little room of TV scenery made to look like their old, small house, which is now located in the cavernous library room of a

mansion. They obviously have been watching a video of their big night and acting out their parts over and over again. For the winning parents, it's fun. But for the kids, it's boor-ing.

Does the Easter story ever get old for you?

I've got a couple of thoughts for you about Easter today, and then some "so what" about Easter, that might help you see the resurrection of Jesus in a whole new light.

Think about this: if we didn't know more than that "the tomb was empty", would we be filled with wonder? The empty tomb by itself just makes this into a mystery: "Where did the body go?" We would be befuddled like the women and Peter, who see way less than they expected.

No, the resurrection and the triumph over death is not about the empty tomb, with the disappearance of his body; it's the amazing appearances of the Risen Jesus to his disciples through the next 30 days that cement the meaning of the empty tomb into the hearts and minds of his people. They don't "get it" until they "get HIM"!

Is that you, today? Are you an "empty tomb" kind of person, blinking in surprise and disbelief and puzzlement, and then slowly getting back to your normal life? Or are you a person for whom Jesus has appeared—in some form or fashion, you find you know this is true, and that source of knowledge is from a source outside yourself, outside the social pressure of the church? Have you had that "shift" where you have moved from doubt to faith—dramatically, perhaps, or just quietly—as though a still, small voice has ushered you from "skeptic" to "believer", and even to "a follower of the Risen Jesus"?

When Jesus comes to you, the power of that experience erodes doubt, until it rolls off you like a snake shedding its skin. When you come to Jesus, a connection gets made that has power to shine light into darkness, and start a new life in you that lasts forever.

Now, here's another thought about Easter. In a way, of course, Easter is a big deal, but not *that* big a deal. Think about it. Jesus was raised from death by the power of God. The first written record was probably Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, where he passes on the tradition he has learned. "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." (1 Corinthians 15:3-8, NIV)

That's wonderful. There's corroborated testimony, from several eye witnesses. But notice, Paul doesn't even mention the empty tomb. Without the resurrection appearances, no one would have cared about the cross of Jesus, or the life of Jesus, or the words of Jesus, or the empty tomb. Without the resurrection appearances, we would not be gathered here, listening for this word of hope, of assurance of faith, and of the powerful love of God that beats even death.

Christ has risen—but even more important than Christ being raised at that time, Christ soon left the planet to go to his Father, to God. This is the second point. If he had stuck around

in Judea, he would be a fixture of history—a phenomenon, fixed in that time and place, long ago. But because he has rejoined God the Father, and has taken his rightful place, he is not stuck in that time, but is available to each of us, and all of us together as His Body, the Church, if we let him be the Head of this operation, of us, and our community with Him.

Now, here's the “so what” of Easter: Is Christ risen and LIVING in you? Or is it that his body is just gone—stolen or rotted in some burial place, or raised we don't know how or where, stuck forever back there in the past?

You see, for those who have met the Risen Lord, he's a “now” thing. He is the Living One, the Lord—the boss—of our lives. And that changes *everything*. We know him. We hear from HIM through these pages. We hear His voice in faith-conversations with other people. We sense His Spirit nudging us in the middle of doing something else. We put aside other things so we can welcome Him into each day, and we listen to him and talk with him; we call that, prayer.

For those who have met the Risen Lord, it's an empty tomb, but a very full, full-filled life. If you want to make this connection with the God who loves you more than you can imagine, please talk with me today, give me your number, and we'll set up a time to meet. Jesus is asking you to follow him, not just believe in him. THAT's the “so what” of Easter.

May the Risen Lord be risen in you, this Resurrection Day!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on April 8, 2007 by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]