

20th April 2025

Easter Celebration!

Emma King | John 20:1-8 | The Empty Tomb

Reading - The empty tomb.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So, she came running to Simon, Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him." So, Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb, both were running but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus's head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

John 20:1-8

There are some places in the world where history changed forever.

- The beaches of Normandy
- the Berlin Wall that once divided a city,
- the Twin Towers in New York,

All places that are marked in history. But there is one place that is different to them all. Not because of what was found there but because of what *wasn't* found. A tomb carved into a rock where the body of Jesus once lay. And on that early morning, over 2,000 years ago, that tomb was found empty.

So, as I was preparing over this sermon, I've been looking at each of the Gospels, each of the accounts of that day. So, what I would like is for us to gather around that empty tomb in our minds and look through the eyes of the four witnesses, the writers of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each of them tells the story with slightly different details. It's as though we are standing in a courtroom hearing testimony from four people who saw the same miracle, each describing it from a different angle.

How many of us here have been telling a story with a group of friends about the same thing and each person has seen it slightly differently from a different perspective? And it's a bit chaotic isn't it? - when you're trying to tell the story and each person is saying it slightly differently. It doesn't make the story different; we just tell it differently. And through each one of them, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we see not only that the tomb was empty but that it changed everything. It changed history.

Now all four Gospels, even though they be slightly different, they all agree on one thing. *Women were the first to come to the tomb.* This in itself is remarkable. In a time when women were generally married very young and were mainly under the protection and authority of men, God chose them to be the first witnesses of the resurrection on that first Easter morning.

- *Matthew* tells us that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.
- *Mark* mentions Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome.
- *Luke* adds Joanna to the group and confirms that others were with them.
- *John* focuses on Mary Magdalene alone, though later it becomes clear that she was not alone the whole time.

Each Gospel describes the women coming early in the morning, around dawn after the Sabbath. They were not expecting to find a risen Lord. They were coming to anoint a dead body, to mourn and to honour Jesus in the way that they could. They were coming with spices, not with praise. They were coming with sorrow, not with celebration.

But their grief that they came with was about to be interrupted by glory.

Each Gospel speaks of the stone that has sealed the tomb and how it was rolled away.

Matthew gives the most dramatic account. An angel of the Lord descended from heaven, caused an earthquake, rolled back the stone and sat on it. He says that the guards trembled and became like dead men. Mark, Luke and John don't mention the earthquake or the guards, but they all affirm that the stone was rolled away when the women arrived.

Now what's interesting is the stone wasn't moved so Jesus could get out. He had already risen. The stone was moved so that we could look in. We could start our journey of searching for Jesus. It was so the women and later the disciples could see the evidence of his resurrection. And the message is simple. God moved what man could not. The resurrection was not a human achievement, but a divine victory.

The next thing that meets the women is not Jesus, but a message. Matthew says that the angel told them, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen as he said." Mark tells of a young man in white robes who says, "He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him." Luke describes two men who ask, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." And John doesn't describe angels speaking first. Instead, he lingers on Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus later. But when Peter and John arrive at the tomb, they see the linen cloths and they believe.

So, despite the slight variations, the core message is the same. Jesus is not in the tomb. He has risen. So, think about the contrast. The women had come expecting death, but encountered life. They had come to grieve, but left to proclaim. God had done something so unexpected, so impossible, that they could hardly take it in.

The responses to the empty tomb are varied and deeply human.

- In Matthew, the women leave the tomb with fear and great joy and run to tell the disciples until suddenly Jesus himself meets them and says, "Do not be afraid."
- Mark ends with the women trembling, bewildered and afraid. An honest reflection of how overwhelming this miracle was.
- Luke shows the women reporting the news to the Apostles, but the men don't believe them. Sounds to them like nonsense. Yet Peter runs to the tomb.
- John gives the most personal moment. Mary, weeping in the garden, turns and sees someone she thinks is the gardener. Then he says her name. "Mary," he says, "and she just knows it is the Lord."

So, each gospel captures a different response. Shock, disbelief, fear, joy, faith. And isn't that exactly how we still respond today? The resurrection isn't something you simply nod at. It grabs your heart, confronts your assumptions and demands a response from us. Some people stumble over the differences in these accounts, but think of it like four people watching the same breathtaking event from four corners of the room. One focuses on the light, another on the sound, another on the people, another on emotion. All are telling the truth just from their perspective. The differences in the Gospels don't undermine the resurrection. They make it more human. They make it more authentic. If the accounts were identical, word for word, we might actually suspect something. We might not actually believe it. But instead, we get four unique voices all proclaiming the tomb was empty and that Jesus is alive. And that is at the heart of Easter.

So, what does the empty tomb mean for us today? It proves that Jesus is who he claims to be. Jesus didn't just die a martyr's death. He rose in power just like he said he would. He is the Son of God, victorious over sin and death. It means that death is not the end. The resurrection is not just Jesus's story, it's a preview of ours. If there is one word that echoes from the tomb louder than any other, it's the word hope. The resurrection of Jesus is the greatest act of defiance against despair the world has ever, ever seen. When the women walked to the tomb that Easter morning, they carried the weight of hopelessness. Their Lord had died, their dreams had died with him. But when they found that stone rolled away and when they heard the words, "He is not here, he has risen," something stirred that would never be silenced again.

Hope broke through. Hope that darkness does not get the last word. Hope that pain is not pointless. Hope that brokenness can be healed. Hope that death is not final. And this is not a vague sentimental kind of hope. This is living hope, living today. This hope is alive because Jesus is alive. And there's one thing about hope. It doesn't remove the pain, but it transforms it. The resurrection doesn't erase the scars of Good Friday, it redeems them. Jesus still had the wounds in his hands when he appeared to the disciples, but those wounds were no longer marks of defeat, they were now badges of victory.

So maybe you've come on this Easter Day with a heavy heart. Maybe life feels a little bit uncertain or you're walking through a season of grief or anxiety or loss. If so, this message of Easter is for you. There is hope, not because everything is perfect but because Jesus is present. Not because the tomb is full of answers, but because it is empty. Easter reminds us that even when all seems lost, God is still writing our story. There is hope that like Mary who recognized Jesus, that we will recognize him today. And if we go searching for him, he will have his arms outstretched wide and he will lean forward for us to grab hold of his hand.

So let me leave you with two phrases that echo through all four Gospels.

Come and see
Go and tell

“Come and see.” - That's the invitation for us. Come and look into the tomb. Examine the evidence. Feel the wonder inside of us. See the linen cloths lying there empty and hear the angels' words.

“Go and tell.” - That's the mission. Don't stay at the tomb. The good news isn't meant to be hidden in a graveyard. It's meant to be shouted from the rooftops. He is risen. Shout it from the rooftops because Easter is not a myth. It's not a metaphor. It's a miracle. The tomb is empty and Jesus is alive. And because of that, nothing is ever going to be the same again.

So, if you've come today with sorrow, he offers you joy. If you've come with questions, he offers you his peace. If you've come with sin, he offers you forgiveness. If you've come with fear, he offers you hope. The Gospels all point to this singular history-shaking truth. He's not here. He has risen just as he said. So let us believe it. Let us rejoice in it and let us live in the power of the risen Lord. Amen.