

OUTSIDE THE EMPTY TOMB

In my 30-year career as a pastor, I have officiated at about 250 funerals. Having seen so many family members, loved ones, and good friends, standing beside the grave of a person they cared about who just died; and seeing firsthand the depth of their grief and despair, it allows me to imagine what Mary Magdalene must have been going through. The sorrow. The pain. The profound sense of loss.

Mary had loved Jesus dearly. And Jesus had loved her dearly, too. She undoubtedly remembered, and would remember for the rest of her life, the day Christ saved her by casting out seven demons. She was one of Jesus' most faithful and caring disciples, and probably even helped to financially support his ministry. She was present on *Golgotha*—the place of a Skull—on the first Good Friday, as Jesus suffered terribly and died on the cross. And now Mary Magdalene, this most devoted of Jesus' followers, was at his tomb, grieving her catastrophic loss, three days after his horrific death. Her heartache was inconsolable. Death had taken from Mary the most important person in her life; the person she had loved more than anyone else on earth.

And the way Jesus had died. Treated like a depraved criminal. Humiliated, brutalized, beaten and whipped, then hung upon a cruel wooden crucifix to suffer in agony while the life slowly ebbed out of him. Mary knew that Jesus was an innocent, wonderful, caring man; someone whose only crime was that he had healed the sick, cared about the poor and lowly, and lifted up the outcasts of society whom no one else wanted anything to do with. And now Jesus was gone. Dead and buried. The victim of a horrible and undeserved execution.

When Mary went off to visit Jesus' tomb early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, she anticipated seeing what you and I and anyone going to the cemetery to visit a deceased loved would see: a sealed up grave that the living are barred from entering and the dead are incapable of exiting.

These days, of course, unlike with Jesus, we don't inter the dead in caves and roll a huge stone over the entrance. We bury them. We lay their body to rest in the ground, in a sealed concrete vault; then we cover the plot over with dirt, put up a gravestone or some kind of marker, and there the body stays.

When we visit a loved one at the cemetery, we're really only visiting their earthly remains. We're visiting the part of that person that has been left behind after the breath of life God gave them has departed. That's what Mary Magdalene thought she would be visiting when she headed off to the tomb where Jesus had been interred. She thought she would be visiting the place where Jesus' lifeless body lay at rest.

Why would she think otherwise? And, of course, she fully expected that lifeless body of Jesus to still be there. After all, that's what the dead do. Nothing. People who have died don't breathe; they don't get up and walk around; they don't speak. They just stay where they've been put, cold and lifeless. The best that can be hoped for when a loved one dies is that their pain and suffering has ended and they're now in a better place, in Heaven; that they have been reunited with loved ones who died before them; that they're now in a glorious and unimaginable Paradise where there is no more sorrow or sickness, and every tear is wiped away.

But we understand and accept that their lifeless body, the shell of who they once were, has been left behind. Because that's the reality. That's what's supposed to happen after death. And that's what Mary Magdalene's frame of mind was when she approached Jesus' burial place: a rocky, cave-like garden tomb. She fully expected that Jesus' corpse would still be where Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus the Pharisee had placed it three days ago. But the wonder, the mystery, the miracle of Easter is that it wasn't there. The tomb was empty. first thing Mary thought was that someone had made off with Jesus'

But why someone would do that to Jesus, only God knew. Grave robbing wasn't unheard of in Jesus' time and place. Perhaps it was even fairly common, because bodies were sometimes buried with their most precious worldly possessions. But in Jesus' case, there were no valuables to steal. Even his simple, inexpensive clothes had been taken by the Roman guards who had crucified him, and gambled for as he was dying on the cross.

Jesus had no money. Much of his monetary sustenance had come from the women disciples who had followed him and financially supported his ministry. And Jesus didn't wear fancy jewelry—there were no gold or silver rings on his fingers or chains around his neck. So when Mary saw that Jesus' body was gone, she had to have felt a mixture of confusion, outrage, grief and pain. In her mind she must have been screaming, how could they? How dare they take the body of a man who had done nothing wrong, committed no crime, and had devoted his life to healing the sick and proclaiming the Good News of God's Kingdom.

What possible gain was there

Mary immediately ran off to tell Simon Peter and Jesus' beloved disciple that somebody had taken Jesus' body. Again, that was a natural and understandable reaction to an empty tomb that wasn't supposed to be empty. Dead bodies don't just up and disappear on their own. Someone had to have made it disappear. But Simon Peter and the beloved disciple weren't a whole lot of help. They ran to the tomb and took a peek inside; and, except for Jesus' burial cloths, the cave where he had been interred was empty, just as Mary said. John's Gospel doesn't say anything about Peter's reaction to Jesus' empty tomb; but it does say that the beloved disciple who was with Peter "saw and believed." Exactly what he believed isn't explicitly stated. But whatever Peter and the beloved disciple were thinking, good or bad, right or wrong, they simply turned around and left, leaving a distraught Mary behind, all alone. And they didn't say anything about the empty tomb—not a word or comment—at least not to Mary.

Peter and the beloved disciple returned to where they had come from, and went back to doing whatever it was they had been doing before Mary Magdalene came to them. Much like you and I will go back to what we were doing—back to our normal, ordinary, everyday lives and activities that were going on before we came running here to this church to listen to this unbelievable story, this farfetched, implausible tale—that the tomb of Jesus was empty.

While Peter and the beloved disciple left and returned to business as usual, Mary Magdalene remained, standing outside Jesus' empty tomb. And I'm going to stop the Easter story there, right at that point, with Mary standing outside Jesus' tomb, confused and not knowing what to think or believe. Because you see, that's where most of us are.

Right now, at this moment in our lives, we're exactly where Mary Magdalene was at that point in the story: standing outside Jesus' empty tomb, also confused and not knowing what to think or believe. Because, just like Mary, our knowledge and experience tells us that, without question, dead people stay dead. People who have died don't walk out of their tombs; they stay in them, always and forever interred.

But Easter makes the exact opposite, incredibly amazing claim. Colliding head-on with all of our life experience, all the physical evidence, all of our human logic and our personal knowledge about death, Easter declares that after three days, the tomb of one man who died was found empty. Exactly how it became empty is for us to now reflect on, wrestle with, and believe or disbelieve.

Easter poses a great challenge to us, my friends. The Easter story dares us to believe that a dead man didn't stay dead, but instead, by the power and

love of God, he was released from the tomb. And he would never experience death again. Easter holds up the unbelievable claim that two thousand years ago, a nomadic Jewish rabbi named Jesus, from a small, insignificant town called Nazareth, located in a region called Galilee, in the land we now know as Israel, died on a Roman cross like thousands of other agitators and criminals did; but unlike all of them, Jesus alone was raised from the dead and made immortal.

And more than that, Easter declares that Jesus is still alive and present in the world even today. And that Jesus always will be alive. Forever and ever. And that Jesus wants us to live forever and ever with him.

You can't get much lower on the probability scale. That's an absolutely ludicrous claim. Because our logical, educated minds tell us that dead people stay dead. They don't come out of their graves, as the Christian story claims Jesus did, to walk around town and appear to over five hundred people at one time and engage in conversations and eat char-broiled fish on a beach in the presence of his astounded disciples.

But our Christian faith claims that all of those things happened, because Christ is risen. Death couldn't contain him. The grave couldn't hold him. The war is over, and life has won the battle. Thanks to Jesus Christ's resurrection, life is the winner by knockout.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to the members of the Corinthian church, who had their own doubts about Jesus' resurrection and needed the encouragement and hope of Paul's words, "this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. And when this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' "O death, where is your victory? Oh death, where is your sting?" "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

A woman named Grace Watkins wrote an Easter poem that speaks to all of us who have experienced the death of a loved one. It goes like this:

The door is closed," I heard a woman say
 Concerning one for whom the earthly way
 Was habitation, glorious and bright
 Then I remembered that a hillside tomb
 Opened as soundlessly as lilies bloom.
 O living Father, help our hearts to see
 The door is open, open timelessly.

So, here we stand on Easter Sunday morning, at the “open door” of Jesus’ empty tomb. With our already deceased loved ones held close in our hurting hearts, or with the fear of our own death or the death of someone near and dear to us rattling around in our minds, we look at the place where Jesus’ body was laid to rest but is no longer there, and we question. And we yearn. We want to believe, with all our hearts and every fiber of our being, that the Easter story is true. That it’s not some lie, some stupid rumor or wild and crazy fabrication. We wonder. We hope. We doubt. And we hope some more.

Christ is risen? Is he? Could it really be true?

I dare to say to you in faith this morning that, yes, Christ is risen. But I won’t blame you if you don’t take my word for it. Lord knows that, when it comes to the Easter story, there’s a lot of room for skepticism and disbelief. But I truly believe that, if we stand outside the empty tomb long enough; if we wait patiently enough, watch carefully enough, and open our hearts wide enough, Jesus will somehow, in some way, show himself to us. We will encounter the risen Lord, and he will call our name just as he called Mary Magdalene’s name.

And then our hearts will rejoice because the Easter claim will become fully real to us, and we will be able to proclaim with joy and awe, as Mary did, “I have seen the Lord!”

My prayer is on this Easter Sunday is that, by the grace of God, we will have such an encounter with the risen Christ. Amen.