

# The Empty Tomb

John 20:1-18

<sup>1</sup> Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

John's Easter account begins with a lot of running. When Mary Magdalene found the tomb empty, she ran to tell Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Her words, like the shot of the gun that begins a race, send the two disciples running to check it out for themselves.

When we look out at the congregation on Easter morning, not many of us are breathless. In our small congregation we didn't even race to get a seat because the church has a few more in attendance, but know we can all get a seat. Why have we all come? Did we come to hear something new, or to hear the old, old story once again? Is anything more than the force of habit at work?

Swiss theological giant Karl Barth said that what brings people to worship—not just on Easter, but any day—is an unspoken question clinging to our hearts and minds, and that question is simply this: "Is it true?" Is it true that God lives and gives us life? Is it true that God not only established a routine, what we call the laws of nature, but that one day God broke the routine and somehow raised Jesus from the dead? Is it true that something so extraordinary happened on that morning that we can only rebuild our lives on its foundation? Is it true?

These are such powerful questions—and they are unavoidable on a day such as this. Sometimes we are tempted to conclude that Easter is not a day for beginners. Rather, it can seem as if Easter is the advanced course for Christians, to be undertaken only after completing the introductory courses that deal with Jesus' life and teachings. Begin with the Sermon on the Mount. Marvel at Jesus' wisdom. Learn from him. Become fascinated by his life, fixed on his person. If we begin there, perhaps then we will be better prepared to hear this mysterious tale about Jesus rising from the dead.

It can seem quite odd that people would flock to worship on Easter, of all days, a day on which we proclaim the very things that may be hardest to believe. However, it is clear from those who knew Jesus, from the apostles of the early church and from the authors of Scripture, that Easter is not the dramatic conclusion to the story for those who are able to follow it that far. Rather, Easter is the beginning.

We read the first sermons that were ever preached in the early church as recorded in Acts. With what do they begin? They make no reference to Jesus' teachings. His earthly life receives scant attention. It is almost as if the story of his life is of interest only if we see it from the vantage point of Easter. Even Jesus' teachings are not seen as important in their own right, because there is little that is

original in them. Rather, they take on meaning only when we take into full account who the teacher is, that is, God's chosen one who died and was raised again.

This is why the Gospels have been called Easter accounts with extended prologues. For the early followers of Jesus, the beginning point of Christian proclamation was the Easter event. Over and over the disciples started with proclamations about Easter, as if it were the only place to begin. Through the centuries Christians have begun their journey of faith by running to the empty tomb. As modern people, who like to think of ourselves as sophisticated, we sometimes forget that the idea that God could raise someone from the dead would be as difficult for these ancient people to believe as it is for us. These ancient people were not stupid. They had seen many people die and there were only a very few accounts of people coming to life again. And in each of those cases there was intervention by a great prophet.

Yes, there is something in the story to doubt. There is also another way to put it: there is something in the story that reached the deepest regions of our hearts and minds, where both doubt and faith are found. That is, in the resurrection God gave us such a miracle of love and forgiveness that it is worthy of faith, and thus open to doubt. The very doubts we may hold attest to the scale and power of what we proclaim. So the place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things we never doubt. Realities about which we hold no doubt may not be large enough to reveal God to us. So we say without apology or hesitation: what we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty, too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imaginations.

Easter and the empty tomb may be just the place for beginners, after all. The place to begin in the life of faith is not necessarily with those things that are beyond the reach of our doubt. Rather, perhaps we need to begin where the early church began, with the larger realities and deeper mysteries that are open to doubt,

but are also large enough and deep enough to reveal something of God to us. That is the promise held out to us this day, the promise of Easter, the promise of the empty tomb, which has throughout history been the occasion of the greatest doubt and also the source of the most profound faith. Perhaps we will find that the early church was right to begin just here, where the stakes are highest, risking doubt in order to claim a larger faith. Could it be that one of the reasons we are here on a day such as this is that we long to swim in the depths of realities that are large enough to reveal God to us, where both the risk and the promise are that much greater?

We hope that when we leave worship on this day, we will have exchanged our question marks for exclamation points—but a question mark is a good and fitting place to begin, at the empty tomb. **Martin B. Copenhaver**

It is at the empty tomb that we find new life in the endlessly creative life of God. John tells us first and foremost that Jesus now lives in the very life of God and Jesus also lives with and for us, John echoes at the Easter climax of his Gospel what he declared at its beginning: "the Word was with God" (1:1). Now he proclaims, the Word *is* with God, and the Word's disciples thus have power to become children of God. **D. Cameron Murchison**

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