

**An Empty Tomb: What Does it Mean for us**  
**Luke 24:1-12**  
***April 21, 2019***

A death has occurred. It was a cruel, barbarous, and hideous death on a Roman cross, one of the most painful, humiliating deaths possible. For the band of followers which at times had swelled to great numbers, for his inner circle of disciples, it was all over. Their hopes and dreams of a renewed Israel patterned after their great hero David, had died that black Friday. Only the women stayed close to the end. The men were like those who don't sit around for the credits that roll at the end of the film. Apart from two of them, Peter and another disciple, they had disappeared into the background of Passover weekend.

But the women had a loyalty and love that wouldn't let go. A couple of them followed Joseph of Arimathea to his family tomb, but could do nothing more that day as the Sabbath was approaching. Joseph was a rich member of the Jewish council. Only the rich could afford a private tomb. The poor like Jesus and his family would have simply been wrapped in a shroud and buried in a shallow grave.

But Joseph, although a man of status and importance, was also a man secretly waiting for God's kingdom. Matthew even calls him a secret disciple of Jesus. Jesus' body was wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a newly carved out shelf in the rock face of the tomb.

Two of the women we are told observed where the body was taken. They sat outside the tomb and watched. One was Mary Magdalene, the other, Mary, possibly the sister-in-law of Jesus.

It's the night before Sabbath. Nothing can be done until Sunday. In the meantime they spend the remainder of Friday night and Saturday preparing the spices. Even though the earth has shifted, the laws of nature disturbed, the temple veil cut in half by the earthquake following Christ's death, in spite of these disturbances, not to mention the death of their dreams, the women wait. They rose from their position outside the tomb and "rested according to the commandment." How could they, we wonder!

And yet that is exactly what happens to the human family at death. When my father died I was only a teenager. He had been sick for a few years so it was not a total surprise, but shock still engulfs you. Death can paralyze a family. You can't go to work, shop, go out with friends, or live as if nothing has happened. Death of a loved one brings life to a screeching halt. I remember it like it was yesterday.

These women, however, had the one thing I didn't at the time. They had their faith to stabilize them. They observed the Sabbath; they sat in their regular pew at synagogue; they said the same prayers, heard the same voices, and heard the same Scriptures read. Even when their world had been blown apart by his death, their religious heritage kept them on firm ground. It was within this religious tradition that they waited for Sunday morning.

Having just experienced that tradition in practice last weekend when our hotel was filled with orthodox Jews and their rabbis, I can appreciate the women's stability. Not only was food carefully separated-no milk mixed with meat for dinner-but even the elevators would not respond to our impatient fingers stabbing the floor number we wanted. On Sabbath no one works; pushing a button is verboten. So the elevator stops on every floor, no matter how hard you push the button!

With my father's death I had none of that faith to cling to. What I remember is the silence. My older brother would walk with me down to the service, but we had nothing to say. We had no words to speak to death. It was final, dark and depressing! On that day all the glamour and hopefulness of the early 60's in Britain seemed to vanish for us. As I stood with my brother at the grave, staining on the ropes as the coffin is lowered into the dark hole, the descending coffin bumping against the earth walls, I can tell you death looked pretty final and bleak to my young mind. Paul reminds us: *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.*

So where do we look for more a promising outlook on our future? Are we looking in the right place? Where does faith and hope play in your

daily life? How does it inform your life, your ambitions, your ethics, and your priorities? Is it possible that we are looking in all the wrong places for meaning and purpose? These women may have felt that their future had been dashed, but faith kept them rooted in reality. They got the spices ready and waited.

In 1980 a tomb was discovered in Jerusalem. Hundreds of similar tombs have been discovered in the vicinity because of the construction boom. Inside they found ossuaries, boxes containing the bones of the deceased. This was common practice. Once the bodies decomposed after a year or two, the bones were deposited in boxes and stored in small shelves in the tomb. Six of the ten ossuaries had inscriptions on the outside of the boxes. Here are the names the archeologists found carved on ossuaries in the Talpiot tomb: Jesus, son of Joseph; Maria; Mariamene; Matthew; Judas, son of Jesus; and Jose, a diminutive of Joseph.

The official report written by the archeologist Amos Kloner found nothing remarkable in the discovery. After taking inventory, the boxes were put on shelves in a warehouse, where they sat undisturbed for more than 20 years. But in 2002, while working on the now debunked claims for the James ossuary, a Toronto documentary and filmmaker, along with James Cameron of Titanic fame, produced a discovery channel film claiming that these bones were in fact those of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and their child, as well as Mary, his mother, his brother James, and Matthew a possible relative. Do you hear the voice of Dan Brown singing the Da Vinci Code theme?

When the original archeologist was interviewed about the upcoming film he said, "It makes a great story for TV, but it's completely impossible. It's nonsense." Some in the liberal wing of the church say that such a discovery of Jesus' bones would make no difference to their faith. They leave what happens to the body up to God. The resurrection was purely spiritual anyway and relies not at all on a physical body ascending from the tomb. So they say, but the New Testament will have a very different answer. Yes, there are lots of folk who would welcome this to be true for it would justify their refusal to believe in the message of resurrection. They would prefer that it all ended in this bone box.

When the women return on Sunday morning to the tomb they find the heavy stone rolled away and no body inside. What could this mean, they wondered. As if in reponse two angels ask them to get a new perspective on life, “why do you look for the living among the dead?” You are looking in the wrong place for him, in other words.

I was sitting in St. George’s Cathedral in Jerusalem. We have walked around the old city all day and I’m weary. In the silence I picked up the hymn book and turned to the easter hymn section. Here is the one that grabbed my attention. The first stanza:

*If Christ had not been raised from death our faith would be in vain, our preaching but a waste of breath, our sin and guilt remain. But now the Lord is risen indeed; he rules in earth and heaven; his gospel meets a world of need-in Christ we are forgiven.*

And in the second stanza we sing: *If Christ still lay within the tomb then death would be the end, and we should face our final doom with neither guide nor friend...*

And the last stanza: *If Christ had not been truly raised his church would live a lie; his name should nevermore be praised, his words deserve to die. But now our great Redeemer lives; through him we are restored: his word endures, his church revives in Christ, our risen Lord.*

The women took this message to the eleven and their response is perhaps not so different from many 21 century skeptics. *Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale. And they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*

It was so much easier for them to remain with the cloud hanging over them. They could go back to their fishing, their wives, their local pub, and live out their days in relative peace and quiet. To believe this story of the women would demand a radical change in their lives, full

of risk and danger. They would be witnesses to this miracle of resurrection. And that of course is what happened to them all.

Let me suggest that, while not identical, a similar predicament faces us today. To believe that this tomb is empty, that Jesus is indeed raised bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven and coming again to judge the living and the dead, asks a serious question of us. To really believe this means that our perspective on life will be radically changed. We will be tempted to think that it is just an idle tale. But should we surrender to faith then this living Christ will change our assumptions, our attitude to life, indeed to everything our secular society believes. It will even mean that worship will become as necessary as breathing. And most of all, such a faith in the living Christ will open us up to a genuine relationship with the divine. It is this relationship, built on the assurance that the tomb is empty, that Christ is alive, which will give you a centre, and a clarity that will satisfy your deepest longings. We just need to stop looking in all the wrong places for our answers. Christ is the answer. He is Risen! Alleluia!

**Amen**