What Do You Make of an Empty Tomb?

Matthew 27:57-28:10

Sermon final

Introduce yourself – He is Risen!

Connections table

Members meeting

Brian Calendine going to lead us in prayer

This morning we celebrate the greatest display of power, and hope known to man as we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible gives us several stories within the story of the Resurrection. I want to consider the people we just read and their different perspectives and responses to the empty tomb.

Before we look at those stories – why does it matter? What is significant about the Resurrection? Why is this so important to Christians?

First, our future hope of eternal life is built upon the resurrection. Paul says that God raised up Christ and will also raise us up by His power (1 Cor. 6:14)…. "He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us…into His presence." (2 Cor. 4:14). The resurrection is our promise and hope that we will one day live forever in a new reality, with new, physical, resurrected bodies that are free from corruption, sin, pain, sorrow, and sickness. We do not need to fear death because we have the hope of a future resurrection and eternal life after. Paul said, "if in Christ we have hope in this life ONLY, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Cor. 15:19). But we have a *future hope* in a *future resurrection* leading to eternal life.

Second, the forgiveness of our sins is hinged upon the resurrection. Paul says that Jesus was "delivered for our trespasses [forgiveness] and *raised for our justification [our righteous position before God in Christ]*" (Rom. 4:25). Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sins, but Jesus rose from the grave as proof that His sacrifice was valid and acceptable to God! The resurrection is ***God's stamp of approval*** that all Jesus said and did was accepted by Him, including His payment for my sin! Paul said if Jesus didn't rise from the grave you are still in your sins!

Third, it's through the resurrection that we have power over sin. The same power that rose Jesus from the dead is given to you to overcome sin and to live lives of obedience to God. You do not have to surrender to sin because the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead now lives in you and you are now able to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

Fourth, our labor for the Lord as Christians is not in vain in light of the resurrection. Paul says that we are to labor for the Lord in light of the Resurrection. Your whole life is dependent upon this event! If Christ has not risen from the dead, as Paul says, our faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15:14)! It's all a hoax…I might as well pack up, go home, eat drink and be merry for tomorrow I die and then I'm WORM FOOD! But CHRIST HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD and that changes EVERYTHING ABOUT THE WAY WE LIVE.

So my hope of eternal life, my courage in the face of death, the forgiveness of my sins before God, the power of God working in me to overcome sin, and my work for the Lord all hang on the reality of the Resurrection!

I want to ask all of you a question this morning…What do you make of the empty tomb? Does your life depend on it? Who do you identify with in the story we just read. We have several different vantage points here.

First lets consider the story of Joseph

1. Joseph

Joseph was a wealthy man who was a member of the ruling council of the Jews. However, he was also a disciple of Jesus, ***but John tells us "in secret"*** (Jn. 19:38). Joseph is the perfect example of "the closet follower" of Jesus. Can I tell you a secret about me…I LOVE watching Duck Dynasty…I'm a closet follower! I know many people think the show is stupid but I've probably watched every episode of Duck Dynasty at least 10 times…Can I tell you something I am actually ashamed of. There have been times when I've been a closet follower of Jesus. I'm afraid to share my faith, to stand for what I truly believe. I say this to my shame!

There were many who secretly believed in Jesus, but they were unwilling to come out of the closet because they were afraid of what the others would think of them. Such is still the case today. Many believe, but they are not willing to come out of the closet. But here, Joseph comes out of the closet!

In vv.57-60 we see that Joseph comes to Pilate. Marks gospel tells us that he "***took courage*** and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus." (Mk. 15:43). You have to consider the courage this would take. To publicly support Jesus would mean losing the respect of his peers. It could even mean being ostracized from the synagogue or losing his seat on the council. Being outspoken about Jesus could mean you lose your job or lose your friends. To go directly to Pilate would have also taken a lot of courage…Pilate was known to be a very temperamental person who could quickly turn on him.

Can I ask you a question: Are you ashamed to publicly proclaim your faith in Jesus? Joseph was too. I think we've all been there. I wish I could say I've never fallen into the fear of

what others might think of me. To follow Jesus may mean I will have to make some very inconvenient changes to my life. For Joseph to handle the body of Jesus would make him unclean for 7 days, and he would be unwilling to participate in the Passover festivities – there was no hiding it now. So often we confess Jesus in private but deny Him in public. Paul said:

> **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." (Rom. 1:16)**

To follow Jesus will mean that you will lose the respect of others. It will mean setting a new course for your life! It takes great courage and resolve to follow Jesus. People will look down on you, they will make fun of you. But what we gain is far greater than what we lose!

Joseph is a picture of someone who was afraid, but finished well and he is an example of courage and boldness to publicly proclaim his faith in Jesus.

2. The religious leaders

In vv.62-66 we see the perspective of the religious leaders. They really are a picture of the lengths of lies and hypocrisy that God's enemies will go to in order to ruin the message of the gospel. Hypocrisy abounds in their story! Unfortunately there are people in this world who have hardened their hearts to the point of no return.

Matthew tells us in v.62 that the ruling council gathers together before Pilate "after the day of Preparation"…that is, on the Sabbath. Gathering in this manner to carry out political interests before Pilate would be a violation of Sabbath. The hypocrisy here is astounding! They are willing to do whatever it takes to stop the testimony of the resurrection ***even break the very rules for which they had Jesus crucified!*** The enemies of God often act in very irrational ways! Even after the soldiers come later and report to them the empty tomb, they are willing to lie to cover up the testimony of Jesus' resurrection.

Notice the manner of their greeting to Pilate in v.63, "Sir" – the word is κυριε – "Lord". They have rejected the Lord, their Messiah, who came to save them…and at His trial they exclaimed, "we have no king but Caesar!" (Jn. 19:15). Now they call Pilate, an enemy of God's people, "Lord".

The enemies of Jesus to this day will continue to hypocritically and illogically ruin the testimony of the resurrection. Consider some of the claims that people make to overturn the Resurrection:

The disciples stole the body – This is the lie that the Jewish leaders came up with. They paid off the soldiers to tell people the disciples stole the body!

So the disciples who ran in fear, Peter who denied the Lord three times, all of a sudden get a burst of courage, they get past the trained Roman guards, in order to steal the body of their dead rabbi and in order to lie about His resurrection! You have to remember that every one of the disciples suffered, were beaten, went to prison, and eventually died for their testimony to the Resurrection. ***Many people are willing to die for what they believe…but no one is willing to die for something they know to be a lie.***

Jesus didn't really die! – He somehow revived in the tomb and told everyone He rose from the dead! So He was beaten 39 times with a cat of nine tails which would literally strip the flesh of its victim to the point of exposing nerves and arteries – most prisoners would die from scourging alone. He then carries the cross, is nailed to it in His hands and feet, and upon death a spear is plunged into His side. At the sight of water and blood that pours out the Roman centurion knows He is dead. In Mark's gospel Pilate inquires of the centurion overseeing the death of Jesus and he confirms His death. The Romans were experts at death…to not carry out their job to the end would have dire consequences. But after all that…Jesus revived and somehow escapes past the guards!

Maybe the disciples hallucinated! – the attempts to discredit the Resurrection get very illogical. I'm actually mentioning the most popular theories! So 500 plus people who all claimed to witness the Resurrection all hallucinated, either together or at different times?! Then they all were willing to die for their hallucination!

People still try to discredit the empty tomb…but the fact is that the tomb still remains empty to this day. What do you make of the empty tomb? If you're waiting for 100% proof that Jesus is who He says He is, and that the tomb is in fact empty…you'll never believe and you will never be saved.

3. Pilate

Maybe you don't want to make anything of the empty tomb. You are undecided, you are inconvenienced by all of this…or maybe, you are really just indifferent to it all.

Pilate's story is your story. Pilate is really indifferent to this all…he just wants to be done with all of this. At the trial of Jesus he famously washed his hands and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood" (27:24). He granted the requests to have Him crucified, he grants the request of Joseph for the body, and now he is asked to give a guard of His soldiers (vv.64-66) which he grants. Do you know what Pilate wants, "LEAVE ME ALONE!" He just wants this whole thing to be over so that life can return to normal. He isn't for Jesus, He isn't against Jesus. He just wants peace and doesn't want his position to be jeopardized. "Can we just get over all of this Jesus stuff?"

Out of all the perspectives in our story I would say that the perspective of Pilate is the most common. Jesus is an inconvenience. People just want to get on with their life. Be honest…is that you?

Maybe you're on the fence this morning and you're just a spectator waiting to get on with your life you have to know that you cannot remain neutral to Jesus! Jesus said, "You are either for me or you are against me." You cannot wash your hands clean and say, "I'm innocent of this man's blood"! Pilate was not innocent…none of us are innocent. All of us have sinned against God and face the penalty of hell because of our sins. But God sent His Son to die on the cross to pay the penalty we deserve. He died in our place so that we might live! And we know that His sacrifice was accepted by God because three days later God rose Him from the grave! The only way that you can be saved this morning is through faith in the blood of Jesus that was shed for sins. You must make a decision. If you leave here without making a decision for Jesus, you've made your decision whether you like it or not. There is no fence – the devil owns the fence!

4. The soldiers

The soldiers are sent by Pilate to guard the tomb at the request of the Jewish council. As they are guarding the tomb, there's a massive earthquake (earthquakes are signs in the book of Matthew that the Kingdom of God has come!), and an angel of the Lord rolls back the stone and "SITS ON IT". ***Being seated is a picture of authority and victory! Glorious!***

Notice in v.3 they "become as dead men". One commentator said – "***Those who were guarding the dead became as dead while the Lord who was dead was made alive."*** That's the power of the Resurrection! That's the power of God over evil! God flips the script! This is the hope we have in God…He is able to take evil and turn it for good. Dead men are made alive. Men who are strong are made as weak. Lost are found. The hopeless are given hope. The damned are saved. The story of the resurrection reminds us that when all seems lost God can still provide a way!

This story is as close as we get to the actual event of the resurrection in all of Scripture…let that sink in for those who need 100% proof – "If I see it I will believe it!". When you stand before God you will not be able to say, "I couldn't see it God! How can you hold me guilty?" He will respond, "I gave you the testimony, I gave you my Word, and I sent my Holy Spirit to convict you of sin, righteousness, and judgment. But you DID NOT RESPOND!" The closest individuals to the actual event of the resurrection are these soldiers…but instead of bowing the knee in faith, they run for fear of Pilate to the Jewish leaders and come up with a story that the disciples stole the body!

People often say, "the only way I would believe in the Resurrection of Jesus is if I actually witnessed it." These soldiers witnessed it first hand, and yet they still didn't believe – Here is

why…it's not because they didn't see a miracle, its because they cared more for their own lives and they were afraid to follow.

The Bible tells us why people reject God's truth – we love our darkness too much. Jesus said, "Light has come into the world but men loved darkness for their deeds were evil." (Jn. 3:19)

The grave is nothing to God. The power of Rome is nothing to God. But it takes much more than an earthquake to soften a hardened heart! What will it take for YOU to believe this morning?!!

5. The women

The gospels tell us there were several women who remained loyal to Jesus at every stage of the Passion Narrative. Matthew includes in His story two of the closest followers of Jesus – his own mother and Mary Magdalene who had seven demons cast out of her by Jesus. The one who is forgiven much loves much. What a precious thing it is to have people in your life who remain loyal when others have forsaken you! Can you think of people in your life who have remained faithful to you when others forsook you? Why not reach out to them this week and thank them? It's when you're in your lowest points in life that true friendship and loyalty is proven. These women didn't care what the religious leaders thought. They didn't care what the cost might be to remain loyal to Jesus – all of their actions are very dangerous. I love the way the gospels show it is the women who have more courage than the men! All they cared about was staying close and remaining loyal to their Lord – at the cross, at His burial, now at the tomb. Those who stay close to Jesus will receive the greatest revelation of Jesus. IF you want God to reveal glorious things to you…stay very very close to Jesus!

The angel appears to them in v.5…and there is for sure a hint of rebuke here in v.6, "He has risen, JUST AS HE SAID!"

Did He not tell you? Did He not tell the disciples? I think when we get to Heaven one day we will be blown away and think, "why did I EVER doubt the glory of this?" The Resurrection reminds us that God is able to open doors that we say are shut and sealed! He is the God who splits the sea so that the people can walk through. He is the God who tears down the walls of Jericho in a single moment. He is the God who spoke the universe into existence in a single word! He is the God who raises the dead…death, the most FINAL event is not the end for God. He can raise the dead! Is there anything our God cannot do? The women thought it was over, the disciples thought it was over…now the angel tells them to run back and tell the boys that Jesus is no longer dead! And soon after Jesus will restore them as well. Many days later they will meet in Galilee, the place where Jesus first commissioned them, but now with a new Commission…to go and spread this gospel to all the world.

So they run with great fear and joy…and as they are going Jesus Himself appears to them! V.9 – "And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped Him!" To take hold of His feet means that they fell down on the ground. This is a beautiful picture for us of worship. They are overwhelmed, that is what God does to those who are faithful and who stay close to Him…He overwhelms them and they fall down in worship and they are filled with great fear and joy!

To take hold of His feet also meant that Jesus had a physical body. Jesus wasn't a ghost! Jesus had a physical resurrected body. This is our hope church! Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection and we too will one day rise with new bodies free from sin, pain, death, sorrow. Do you believe this?

Why do we celebrate on Sundays? Because we celebrate a Risen Lord who has conquered death, who rose on the first day of the week. Every time we gather on Sundays we celebrate and proclaim the new reality that the Kingdom of God has come in power, the King has risen, and we are risen individuals who each have a story of Resurrection! Will you share your story church? Will you run as the women ran and boldly and courageously share with others your story of resurrection! Who cares what others think! There is an empty tomb!! For God's sake share your story with the world of what Christ has done for you!

The Resurrection is proof that God turns the tables. The lowly are elevated to a high status. The weak are made strong. The foolish confound the wise. The dead are made alive. The sinful are turned into saints! This is why the Resurrection is so significant, because it teaches us that our God is never done. Our God keeps His promises. He can take the darkest of situations and turn them for good. He is turning your dark situation into good RIGHT NOW! Maybe it's still Saturday for your situation!! Sunday is coming…wait for it!

The Resurrection teaches us that it's to the lowest that the King chooses to reveal Himself – and it's to those who are faithful, to those who are loyal, and to those who abide and remain close to Jesus that greater revelation and privilege is given. And for those who have denied Him, for those who have failed, as we all have, He is a God who restores and recommissions you and sets you back onto the path of life.

Gospel invitation

IN CLOSING: Maybe you need to be recommissioned this morning….maybe you need to bow the knee for the very first time. Maybe you're here this morning and you have yet to know this resurrection power of God. Maybe you're like Joseph…you believe, but you have been a closet believer – it's time to come out of the closet because Jesus came out of the tomb! Maybe you're still waiting for that 100% proof…you're never going to get it. It's FAITH that saves us. It's the faith of a mustard seed (a tiny little seed) that saves…not proof. You don't need to

have perfect faith this morning…just come to God as you are and He will not turn you away! Jesus said:

> **"Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, [33] but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Mt. 10:32-33)**

If you need to be recommissioned this morning, if you need to surrender your life to Jesus for the first time, if you simply want to worship the Resurrected King…stand to your feet with me and let's worship Him celebrate the God who raises the dead!

Connection Group

1. Why is the resurrection so important for our faith?
2. Read Joseph's story in Mt. 27:57-60. Why did Pastor Brian say Joseph's story is the story of a "closet believer"?
3. Read Romans 1:16 – what does Paul say about being ashamed of our faith?
4. Read Mt. 27:62-66 and 28:11-15 – What are some of the ways that the Jewish leaders tried to cover up the resurrection? Why did they try to cover up the story of the resurrection? Why do people try to cover up the story today?
5. What are some of the alternative stories that people come up with to explain the empty tomb today?
6. Pontius Pilate is a picture of the person who is disinterested in Jesus. What are some ways that the story of Pontius Pilate in Scripture shows his disinterest?
7. Read 28:1-4 - The Soldiers were the first to witness the resurrection. What was their response? What does their response tell us about those who say they need "proof" to believe? Can we ever have perfect proof that Jesus rose from the dead?
8. Read 28:5-10 - What was the response of the women at the tomb? What does their story teach us about faith, loyalty, and worship?