***NOT JUST AN EMPTY TOMB***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

April 9, 2023 (Easter)

Texts: Matthew 27:62-28:15 and Isaiah 25:6-9

 They were afraid of an empty tomb. The chief priests and Pharisees who went to Pilate to ask for guards to secure the tomb where Jesus’ body had been laid, recalled Jesus’ prediction of his resurrection, so they wanted the tomb secured – not because they believed Jesus might rise from the dead, but because they feared his body might be stolen in the night and his disciples ***claim*** he had risen. The religious leaders did not fear Jesus’ resurrection – they deemed that an impossibility; what they feared was the implication of an empty tomb. While Pilate did not give them everything they asked for, he did permit them to secure the tomb with guards to ensure that it would hold the broken body of the One who was proclaimed King of the Jews, the one who had been a pain in their side.

 How odd that the chief priests and Pharisees should recall Jesus’ words about rising from the dead, when Jesus’ own disciples didn’t recall what he had said! Jesus told them again and again that he would be killed and would rise on the third day, but the disciples did not listen or did not believe it or simply forgot it or were in denial, blocking it from their memories. When the women headed to the tomb at dawn of that first Easter morning, there is no indication they had any hope they would find the tomb empty and their Lord risen. They expected to find only the dead body of the crucified Jesus.

 In his book *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner recalls an episode of Candid Camera in which a bird cage was rigged so that the little hanging perch swung back and forth, the leaves of some plants in the cage fluttered, and the trill of a bird could be heard, but there was no bird in the cage. Several unsuspecting folks were maneuvered near the cage and their reactions filmed. Not one of them noticed anything wrong. When asked what they were looking at, they all replied they had been looking at a bird in a cage. When asked to describe the bird, some offered a vague reply, but others gave very detailed descriptions – the bird had a yellow beak, a long tail, bright feathers, and so on. There was no bird in the cage; they saw with their mind’s eye what they expected to see.[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Apparently, the mind can influence what the eyes see. Had the women rushed to the tomb to see if Jesus had been raised, perhaps that would have been a plausible explanation for what they found. But they had no such expectation. They expected to find only the broken body of Jesus, not the folded grave clothes, an otherwise empty tomb, and an angel. While other Gospel accounts describe the women finding the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, and a figure dressed in white speaking to them, Matthew’s account is far more dynamic and spectacular. It is a SHAZAM moment in which the earth quakes and the stone is rolled away by an angel whose appearance is like lightning! So frightening is the whole experience that the guards faint dead away, and the women, who are apparently made of stronger stock than the fainting guards, hear the unexpectedly hope-filled message of the angel: *You are looking for Jesus who was crucified.* *He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.*

 Now Matthew is not accustomed to reporting such dramatic heavenly interventions. It is Luke, not Matthew, who describes the chorus of angels singing to the shepherds on Christmas night and Luke who describes the angel appearing to Mary. It is John, not Matthew, who describes Lazarus staggering out of the tomb. The other gospels have angels at the tomb as messengers from heaven, but Matthew alone describes the thunderous rolling away of the stone and the fierce appearance of a brilliant angel, saying: “*Do not be afraid*.” As Union Presbyterian Seminary President and New Testament scholar Brian Blount notes:

*It is the resurrection that is God’s act. The cross, …well, that’s on us! We are the ones who drag him there, hang him there, kill him there. God is the one, the only one, who raises him up from ther*e.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We know what God has done there, so we come today with different expectations from those women at the tomb. We come with smiles and flowers and alleluias. Already forgotten are the pain of the cross and the grief of Good Friday. Forgotten are the earthquake and the darkness that covered the land as Jesus breathed his last. Forgotten are the cloth-wrapped body and the stone that sealed the grave. For we already know what the Marys found that morning –

the awesome angel whose arrival shook the earth

the Roman guards sprawled on the ground

the stone rolled away to reveal an empty tomb

the angelic message: “He is not here; for he has been raised!”

 the risen Christ saying, “Peace to you! Be not afraid!”

We come knowing that not only is the tomb empty, but the Lord is risen. But we would never have known, never have heard, never have come this day had the Marys not faithfully followed the instructions of the angel and their risen Lord to go and tell what they had seen and heard.

 Go quickly, as fast as your little feet will carry you. Go away from this place with its empty tomb and its rolling stone and its angel of the Lord. Go away from this place of mourning, for there is no one here to be mourned – Jesus has been raised from the dead. Go and tell that to his disciples! Tell them he is risen! No rational mind would believe it, but the mind of a believer might, one who had heard Jesus teach and seen Jesus heal and raise Lazarus from the dead; such a mind would know that with God all things are possible – even resurrection. So go to his disciples,

to those eleven who followed him and listened to him,

to those who sat with him when he broke the bread and poured the cup,

but also to those who ran away at his arrest and denied him at his trial

and are hidden away in fear and trembling.

Go to them, says Jesus. “*Go* *to my brothers. Tell them I will see them in Galilee*.”

And here there is cause for pause, for Jesus calls them *brothers*! Though they deserted and denied him, still he calls them brothers; though they forgot what he said about being raised on the third day, still he entrusts to them the good news of Resurrection. *Go and tell my brothers!* What a hopeful word that is for us, for while some of you may be Marys that would have been there at the tomb courageously shrugging off the guards to honor your Lord, there are many more of us, I suspect, who would be hidden with the disciples licking our wounds and mourning our loss in a secluded place hidden from the prying eyes of the Roman and Jewish authorities. Despite the disappointments that we inevitably cause our Lord,

the times we do the very thing we deny to God we will ever do,

the times we violate our promises and God’s commandments,

the times we fail to stand up and do the right thing,

the times we fail to step forward and say what we believe,

still Jesus calls us brothers and sisters. Still, he loves us. Still, he goes to the cross for us, dies for us, and entrusts us with the good news of the Resurrection.

 Go and tell my brothers and sisters, he says. Go and tell the fishermen and tax collector who left their work to follow me. Tell the bank teller and the teacher, the accountant and the attorney, the professor and the student, the home builder and the homemaker who follow me. “*Tell them Jesus has been raised from the dead*,” said the angel. Don’t remain silent about what you have seen and heard! Don’t keep this a secret among yourselves! Go and tell them, “*He is risen!*” So, the Marys went and told the good news because they believed what they had seen and heard. They went and told the disciples who went and told the Jews and then the Gentiles who went and told their neighbors… who went and told… who went and told…. We are here because across 2,000 years and across the seas and across the street, people went and told the good news of the Resurrection to new generations including ours.

The story they tell is not just about Easter’s empty tomb. It is about the risen Lord. The same Lord the Marys met that Easter day as they left the tomb. The chief priests and Pharisees feared that resurrection is what might be told if the tomb was found empty, so they posted guards and circulated rumors that the body of Jesus had been stolen while the guards slept – what some might call “alternative facts” – and they paid off the guards, doing all they could to keep the truth from coming out. But they failed, for the good news of Jesus’ resurrection was grounded not only in the empty tomb, but also in the words of the angel and encounters with the risen Lord. It was good news proclaimed in Jerusalem and Galilee and beyond, far beyond – all the way to Staunton, VA on a cool April morning 2,000 years later.

Who then will *go and tell* that good news tomorrow? Will it be you? You won’t tell it if you don’t believe it. Do you then believe it? If the next generation isn’t told the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen, then the gospel dies with us. God works through us, person to person. We hold the precious hope, joy, and good news of resurrection for the next generation, the gospel handed down to us from faithful generations with this charge - go and tell it to others as the Marys did that Easter morning, tell the good news proclaimed by the angel: the tomb is empty ***because*** the Lord is risen! Tell that good news to your children, your grandchildren, your neighbors, and a world that desperately needs some news that is good. Tell them: the Lord ***is*** risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen

1. Frederick Buechner, “The Miracles in Hand” in *The Magnificent Defeat*, HarperSanFrancisco:1966, p.137 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*, Westminster John Knox Press: 2014, p.61 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)