

Sermon: The grave is empty

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43; 1 Cor 15:1-11; John 20:1-18

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Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

All: The Lord is risen indeed.

Today we have the help of our children in the sermon. Each time when I say: The grave was empty, they will say: Hallelujah! Christ is risen. Then we all will say: The Lord is risen indeed.

The grave was empty.

kids: Hallelujah! Christ is risen.

all: The Lord is risen indeed.

Jesus has risen indeed. This is not just our faith – these are the facts. Twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus, St Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Corinth. He told them: if you doubt that Jesus rose physically from the dead, go and ask for yourself. Many people have seen him alive, and hundreds of those people are now, 20 years later, still alive!

1 Empty grave

We today also possess stories from the most direct eyewitnesses. From Matthew, Mark and John. And St Luke researched the matter and spoke with many eyewitnesses, and wrote his own historical account. Jesus from Nazareth who died on Good Friday, rose from the dead three days later. The grave was empty.

kids: Hallelujah! Christ is risen.

all: The Lord is risen indeed.

When in the early morning after the weekend when Jesus had been crucified, Mary Magdalene and some other women went to the grave of Jesus, they were shocked. They wanted to honor Jesus with some fragrances, but when they arrived, the stone had already been taken away. They saw it from a distance, and ran back to the disciples.

The stone... John makes clear in his Gospel that the stone was not just rolled away. It had been removed from the entrance. This is not just a rolling aside, but a much more dramatic event. The stone was lifted out of its groove; it lay there in the garden - showing the supernatural aspect of the event.

When Peter and John took a look inside the tomb, they saw that everything inside was very orderly. The bandages were there; the strips of linen that had been wound around the corpse of Jesus and the burial cloth that had covered his head, were left behind. Now someone stealing a corpse from under the eyes of a cohort of Roman soldiers, would he first unwrap the body and even fold the pieces of cloth? No ofcourse.

What is more, no one could take the bandages of the corpse of Jesus. John tells us that when our Lord was buried, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea used about 40 kilos of myrrh and aloes to embalm the body; the two men together had wrapped the corpse in linen with these spices. These bandages could only with great trouble be taken off the body again.

The linen cocoon that had been wrapped around Jesus was left behind; Jesus had mysteriously disappeared;

the grave was empty.

kids: Hallelujah! Christ is risen.

all: The Lord is risen indeed.

Death has been conquered by Jesus Christ the Son of God.

This historical and physical evidence was important, because the disciples, even after the resurrection, did not get the point easily. Even though Jesus had been predicting this event for a few years.

Mary Magdalene did not get it when she saw that the stone was removed. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him." Mary was so confused. Did she not remember all Jesus had told her?

2. Peter and John

Peter and John ran to the grave and John was the faster one. They looked inside, even stepped into the tomb, to see with their own eyes what had happened. *Then* John 'saw and believed'. (20:8) John is humbly saying: no wonder I believed. I saw the proof of his resurrection with my own eyes. I saw it with my own eyes. The visible evidence made clear - the body was not stolen, but He rose from the dead!

Peter and John went straight back to the other disciples, back to their homes. They did not linger at the grave, as Mary did. Mary had followed Peter and John back to the grave. Peter and John had seen enough; they had made up their mind. They had become believers in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. I guess they went back home to tell their fellow believers what they had seen and that the Lord had risen, as he had foretold.

They probably also went home because of the problems with the Jewish leaders. Jesus had been crucified just before the Jewish feast of Passover, and during that Feast the religious leaders could not do anything because of the laws of the Sabbath. But as the Sabbath was over now, it was Sunday, would they now continuing persecuting the followers of Jesus as well?

Peter and John went home, they kept the doors and the windows closed, and a few hours later, in the evening, they met with the other disciples for discussing the empty grave, and what to do now.

3. Mary

Mary stayed at the grave when Peter and John went home. She loved her Lord so much. Remember, she had been a prostitute. But Jesus had accepted her and given her a new life. No sin is too large for him; he loves and forgives. Our sins – he forgives them if we humbly and honestly confess them to him.

Mary is the one who wept and dried the feet of Jesus with her own hair, thankful that he forgave her sins. And now, as her Lord was dead, Mary wept. And wept.

A great force of love inflamed her. When the disciples departed from the grave, she did not leave. She sought for him whom she had not found, crying as she searched; being inflamed with the fire of her love, she burned with desire for him whom she believed had been taken away. She did not get the meaning of the fact that the grave was empty.

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While Peter and John grasped that He had risen from the dead, Mary continued mourning for her dead Lord. Was she more confused than the other disciples? Her mind may have been a mess; her faith may have been chaos. Sadness overwhelmed her but she loved and persisted. And God rewarded her for this. He rewarded her love and persistence. God rewards the intense love for people who want to know Him; for people who want to know the truth.

Mary saw angels, and spoke with them, but she was not even satisfied seeing some angels. She wanted Jesus. But when he did appear to her, she did not immediately realize it was him. Did she as a decent woman, turn her eyes down when she thought the gardener had come? Could she not see because of the flood of tears? Was she so confused?

Jesus appeared to Mary. It is very important to see that a woman was the first to see Jesus. Our religion is not a religion of men. It is the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who welcomes women and men alike. Mary is a great example for us; her burning love made her seek, and then she found.

Jesus opens Mary's eyes by speaking her name as the Good Shepherd speaking to his sheep. And the sheep know the voice of the Shepherd. In John 20:1 and 20:10, John calls this woman Mary in the Greek version of her name. When Jesus speaks to her, he uses her Aramaic name: Mariam. The name her parents would have used. When Jesus uses her name, when he addresses her most intimately in her own language with her own name, then she sees Him. He spoke in ʕmeya to her.

And Mariam responds in Aramaic as well: rabboni. 'My Lord', or 'My Teacher'. The word is only used for very high people. Rabboni was often used when people spoke of God, the heavenly Master. By saying rabboni, Mary indicated her love and respect for her Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus tells Mary that he will go to 'My Father and your Father and My God and your God'. He is defining a whole new standing for believers in the divine household. The God and Father of Jesus is now also our God and Father; the intimacy of Jesus, the Son of God, with his Father, is now possible for us. We have received forgiveness and access to God by the death and resurrection of God the Son. The gates to heaven are wide open.

Jesus also tells Mary to go back to the 'brothers'? This was at that moment a new title for the disciples who now had become sons and daughters of God the Father. One family of God, with our risen Lord Jesus as the first brother.

Christ has died and Christ is risen. And we have access to God through him; forgiveness is available; we can start a new life under the wings of our loving Lord and God, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

We can learn much from Peter, John and Mariam Magdalene. They were the first to realize that our Lord rose from the dead. Peter and John used their mind, they looked, they saw, and they believed. The grace was empty!

kids: Hallelujah! Christ is risen.

all: The Lord is risen indeed.

And Mary? She was confused, and totally emotional. But it was her persistent love that made her the first to see the risen Lord.

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People come to faith in Christ in many ways. But it is very encouraging for all of us to see that Jesus revealed himself first to someone who was so sad and so confused. To have it all arranged in our mind is no precondition to meet with Jesus Christ. But to love and to persist.

Jesus calls your name as well: Girgis, Emad, Eman, Shady, Howayda. Fill in your own name. He calls you, to tell you that your past does not matter, and that it does not matter whether we have the whole Christian theology organized in our mind.

He calls you by your name to show you that He is alive today, beyond our feelings, beyond what we see, beyond our theology. He is stronger than death, He is risen, and He unites us with our God and our Father. If only we love Him and persist. He is alive with us today; we are people of hope, people of God - the grave is empty!

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all: The Lord is risen indeed.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.