

THE EMPTY TOMB – Luke 24:1-12

Anglican Diocese of Bathurst – 19 March 2023

1. INTRODUCTION

Friends, it is wonderful to be with you again. My name is Mike, just in case you missed the other week or have maybe even forgotten. And thank you to all those who have expressed appreciation for these talks through Mark. We really hope they will continue to be a blessing.

2. THE WOMEN

Let's turn now today's text in Luke 24.

It's just after dawn on Sunday morning. The night before, after the Sabbath ended at sunset, Salome and the two Marys had gone to the markets to buy spices and oils. Now they are on foot in the growing light, heading to the family tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

Their plan is simple. Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross 3 days earlier, as the Jewish people counted days, on Friday. His body is now lying in Joseph's family tomb. To honour him, and to prepare him for a longer burial, the women intend to wrap his body in linen cloths, with spices and oils. Look at their faces. They are going to prepare a body. That is what they expect, and nothing more.

It gives you a feel for the chaos of these three days that the women have no idea that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had already prepared Jesus' body, on Friday night (John 19:40). It's not their fault, though – how could they know, when so many of the men had run away?

It's also no wonder, that they've forgotten something important. In his Gospel, Mark records them pausing on their way to ask, 'hold on...'

"Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

Jesus' tomb is blocked by a large rock, too heavy for 3 women to move on their own. It's exactly the kind of thing you forget in the middle of stress and fear, like leaving the stove on when rushing a child to the doctor.

But when they arrive at the tomb, something else is wrong. One problem has become another.

² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

On the face of it, this is good news. They were afraid that they might not be able to get in. But fortunately the tomb is wide open. They can access Jesus' body. Or they could, if it were there.

when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

This is devastating, but some of the things they find are also really confusing. I'm sure their thoughts immediately leaped to grave-robbers. But the strips of linen in which Jesus' body had been wrapped are lying in a pile, each in their place, with the cloth that had covered his face still where his head had been, as if his body had simply vanished. No one would unwrap a three-day-dead-body before taking it.

And the soldiers who had been posted to guard the tomb have run away, even though a Roman soldier who abandoned their post or allowed a prisoner to escape would be put to death.

And so the women are left wondering what on earth is going on.

3. RESURRECTION

This side of the resurrection, we might be surprised at their confusion. For those of us who are believers, Jesus has risen from the dead! Isn't it obvious? And those who are skeptics think: this is all religious propaganda, so it's odd that the author would include so many doubts in these fictional characters.

Remember, the women were there to prepare Jesus' body for the long haul in the grave. They weren't expecting him to rise from the dead, because no one was.

Now, it is true that first century Jews believed in a general resurrection of all people at the end of time (as Christians still do today). However, they believed that so clearly that the idea that a single individual could be Resurrected in the middle of history was preposterous. They also knew that someone crucified must be cursed by God.

To put this in perspective, in the decades before Jesus there were a number of claimed Messiahs who gathered large followings and were captured and killed by the Romans. New Testament historian, N.T. Wright, says:

In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. Jewish revolutionaries whose leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option. Unless, of course, he was.

Now, just as the resurrection of an individual was outlandish to the Jews, so the idea of a bodily resurrection was revolting to the Greeks. Since they believed physical matter was evil, the idea of a resurrected God was simply in bad taste.

This is why the women are so confused by what they see.

4. HE IS NOT HERE

Anyway, verse 4

4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.

And the women fall on their faces in fear.

The clothing and sudden appearance of these men suggest to us that they are probably angelic messengers. But remember, they weren't expecting an angel, and we tend to see what we expect to see. And also remember, they are in the tomb of a convicted terrorist leader. Jesus had been falsely accused of leading a rebellion against Rome. His followers are still at large, in hiding. This looks like a trap.

But the men say this

Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen!

He is not here.

I live in a pretty busy part of the city, and from time to time people knock on our door and then go away disappointed. Sometimes, they've come to the wrong address, and I tell them so: sorry, wrong house. But other times, it's a group of kids, or perhaps friends of our housemate, and I might say: sorry, you just missed them. Or she is not here.

The implication of that is pretty straightforward. You're in the right place, just at the wrong time.

That's important because, the obvious thing to think when you come to a tomb, expecting to find a body but finding nothing, is that you are at the wrong tomb. No, this is the tomb where they laid him. But he is no longer here.

Secondly, he has risen.

The young man literally says that Jesus has got up, just like you get up out of bed. Just like Jesus commands, I say to you, little girl, get up. It's like Jesus was just having nothing more consequential than a short nap, or an afternoon siesta.

But of course, Jesus was dead, which means that something much more than just a new day has dawned: the man who was under the curse of God has been raised back to new life by that same God.

See, if Jesus' body was still there, it means that love doesn't really win. It means that God isn't really able to save us. Maybe he can help some little part of us, our spirit or soul, get away to some other place, run away from this world. But our bodies stay hurt forever.

But Jesus' body *is missing* because he is *risen*. Love really wins. God's power can really save us. Jesus handed himself over to sin and death, let them do their worst, and their worst was not enough. Sin and death were not strong enough to keep him. And the resurrection tells us that Jesus has broken their strength, so that sin and death cannot hold anyone who loves him either.

This is the best news.

So the women take this news with them to the 11 – that is Jesus' 12 disciples, minus Judas. And unlike Judas, they respond with faith and trust, remembering the things that Jesus had repeatedly taught them. And they boldly go into the towns and villages, proclaiming the good news. Well, actually, this is a bit awkward.

They did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.

And so the men struggle on a little longer in fear and anxiety. They miss out on the relief of knowing Jesus rose from the dead. We know from other accounts that they were distressed and despondent long after Jesus had risen from the dead.

Why? Because they don't remember and trust his promises. Verse 6:

Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'

In this, I suspect Jesus' disciples hold up a mirror to many of us as we go about our daily lives. In the busyness and pressure of work, family, illness, and finances,

What do you take away? Jesus has conquered death. He has shrugged it off like you throw off a sheet in the morning. He invites everyone to follow him through that door he has opened from death to life. But to do that you need to remember and trust his promises.