

“An Empty Tomb Filled with Hope”

John 20:1-18

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Do you think Mary went to bed that Saturday night? If she did, I am confident she slept little, if any. It is hard to rest when your heart is broken.

It is obvious she was anxious to return to the tomb where Jesus was buried. She could not even wait until the sun came up but left her house while it was still dark, which was as much a reflection of her spirit as the time of day.

She had just lived through a week filled with surprises and was probably longing for a time of peace and quiet at the center of her grief. Surely nothing unusual would happen early in the morning that would interfere with this. Little did she know the biggest surprise was yet to come.

She arrived at the tomb only to discover the stone at the entrance had been rolled away. To her dismay, Jesus' body was missing, which broke her heart even more. How could anyone be so insensitive and cruel? Hadn't they done enough to this man whom she loved so dearly? Would this drama never end? No, it would not, and in the end, she would be glad.

She did the only thing she knew to do at that time. She ran to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple what she had discovered. Immediately, they ran to the tomb to find things as she described. Without any answers they returned home, but Mary lingered at the tomb.

As Mary stood weeping outside the empty tomb, she had an encounter with two angels and then a man whom she thought to be the gardener. Both asked her why she was weeping, and she told them she was disturbed because someone had taken the body of her Lord. She even volunteered to retrieve it if she was told where to go. As it turned out, she did not need to go anywhere. The one she was seeking was standing beside her, and she recognized him after he spoke her name.

After they embraced, Jesus told Mary to go tell the disciples what she had experienced, which she did. “I have seen the Lord,” she said to them as she told them about their conversation.

It is hard to find a more beautiful story in scripture. It has that perfect blend of feelings and facts needed to capture the reader's attention.

How does it speak to you this morning? What part of the resurrection story are you drawn to today? For me it is the empty tomb. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to approach that open tomb as Mary and the disciples did.

Would I have stopped to peer in as Mary and the first disciple to reach the tomb did, or would I have burst in like Peter, eager to examine every inch of that tomb looking for Jesus' body? I'm not sure what I would have done, but even while thinking about it, my heart began racing.

Then it dawned on me. The empty tomb is a vital part of this story, which is why all four gospel writers describe it in detail. However, after God raised Jesus from the dead, that tomb was not empty because now it was filled with **hope**.

One of the most precious gifts God has given to people of faith is hope. All of us know what it is like to walk through the cemetery of broken dreams.

Plans don't always turn out the way we thought they would. Family members and friends disappoint us because our expectations were unrealistic, or they made bad decisions. The person we work for can decide she no longer needs us, or the company can go bankrupt, draining our retirement savings. Our health can fail us, or we can become innocent victims of violence like the bystanders at the Boston Marathon a year ago, or the people who were shot recently at a synagogue in Kansas City.

There is no shortage of reasons we experience grief and despair, and each episode takes a toll on us. God understands and has a message for us this beautiful Easter morning. Shattered dreams will not have the final word in our lives; God will, and that word will be good!

"Easter is about more hope than we can handle," Craig Barnes wrote in the *Christian Century*. He's right, isn't he?

Easter hope assures us there is no situation in life God cannot embrace and change for the better. If God can reach into a sealed and guarded tomb and give life back to His crucified Son, then God can help us with any problem we are facing.

For this reason, that empty tomb tells us Easter is about starting over when you thought all hope was gone. This is because disappointment and grief are always connected to hope for those who love and trust God.

We never have to settle for things as they are and give in to despair. Always, and at all times, God is working on our behalf to bring good out of bad and life out of death. As people of faith, we never come to the end of the road because, according to Old Testament scholar Dr. Walter Brueggemann, the most distinguishing characteristic of God is His ability to make something new.

Does this mean we'll never walk through the cemetery of broken dreams again? Of course not. It does mean, however, we'll never walk alone, and God will never leave us there.

When Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished," he did not mean, "It is over." There was more to his story, which meant there would always be more to ours. The same God who raised him from the dead will lift us up every time we fall.

Is this the message you need to hear today? Your beloved mate of many years died or your marriage dissolved. You lost your job recently and do not know which way to turn. You are facing limitations because of health issues and are not sure what your future holds. Your best friend moved away or betrayed you as Judas did Jesus. You have made bad choices and are reaping the painful results. Like Mary outside the open tomb before she encountered Jesus, you have been crying a lot because your heart is broken.

If so, I have good news for you this morning. "Easter has always been carried on a river of tears," as my friend, Tom Ehrich, writes. "Easter dawned from darkness and found its first witness in a woman weeping outside an empty tomb."

Let Easter hope find its way into your empty heart. Trust the God who raised Jesus from the dead to help you pick up the shattered pieces of your life and lead you down new paths filled with people and opportunities which will make life good again.

No, that tomb was not really empty after God raised Jesus from the dead. It was filled with a hope which can change your life and mine.