

## THE EMPTY TOMB

Luke 24:1-12

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019,  
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.' Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.*

*Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*

*But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*

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*Prayer: On this day of Resurrection, O God, we pray, in the words of Emerson, that our "faith should blend with light of the rising and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be lifted to you in joy. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

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A lot has happened between last Sunday and this Sunday.

- Tiger Woods has pulled off what is probably the greatest comeback in sports history, at least by an individual, almost the resurrection of a career, a body, perhaps a moral and spiritual life.
- One of the most revered Cathedrals in the world has burned, charring but not diminishing its architectural witness to the Christian faith, to Western Civilization, to citizens and lovers of France.
- The long-awaited Mueller report has been released, leading some to respond with the excitement of exoneration, some with the confirmation of chaos and corruption, many with the familiarity of fatigue, most with the sense that few minds will be changed.
- Within the past few hours in Sri Lanka, Christians gathered for Easter worship and tourists for travel met death or injury in multiple bombings.
- And within our own congregation, in addition to the joys and concerns that occur among our members and friends each week, one of our members has intensified her ferocious fight with the of leukemia

treatment at Johns Hopkins hospital, on behalf of the twins – now eleven – whom as a single parent she adopted from Russia eight years ago, brought into her home, brought into our church. She and they are in our prayers, in our care, for they belong to us, and we to them, in the covenant of baptism.

A lot has happened in our church, our nation, our world, these past seven days. To say nothing of the betrayal and arrest, trial and crucifixion of Christ since his palm-laden entry into Jerusalem last Sunday.

## I.

But we are here today – gathered in a sanctuary around an event that transcends the meaning of the word “event.”

- If we are at all familiar with the Christian faith, we hear this event narrated in a way we have heard it narrated nearly every year since we were first exposed to faith.
- If we are new to faith, curious about faith, or here out of loyalty to someone important to us for whom this day is important, the narrative of this event that transcends event may be new to us.

Familiar or new, perhaps we have come today with ears prompted to listen more deeply than we have listened before, hearts hoping against hope for a hope we have not known in years.

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The telling of this event has several chapters and scenes. In the opening scene we read today, the *central action* revolves around an *empty tomb*:

*It is “the first day of the week, at early dawn,” and women who have been with Christ all along come to the tomb, “taking the spices that they had prepared” as part of his burial. They find “the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they [go] in, they [do] not find the body. [And]... they [are] perplexed” about the movement of the stone and the absence of the body.*

Their perplexity reminds us that the empty tomb *alone* doesn’t prove much of anything.

- The empty tomb may be evidence that a body has been stolen and thus desecrated. Matthew takes this possibility into account even as he sets up its rebuttal.<sup>1</sup>
- The empty tomb may be evidence that the people responsible for the burial have made a terrible mistake: placed the body in the wrong tomb, misdirected the women concerning where to go to take their carefully prepared spices.

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In the mid 1990s, a few days after I received my first cell phone, I was scheduled to do a graveside service for an elderly member of the congregation I was serving at the time in Iowa. All her children had long since moved away, but they returned to the town in which they had grown up and in which she still lived to bury her in the family plot.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 27:62-66.

I drove to the cemetery at the appointed time. Found my way to the gravesite. Noticed the handful of family members present. But I saw no signs of a casket, an open grave, a tent, chairs, or even a funeral director nearby.

I had been in that town long enough to know that the funeral home handling this burial did not have the most stellar reputation, but neither did I know how worthily they had earned that reputation.

I stepped away from the family, whipped out my brand new cell phone, flipped it open (as you will recall), and since this was prior to Google called Directory Assistance. I got the funeral director on the line and once I told him the beginnings of the situation we found ourselves in, I put my hand over the phone to protect the family from hearing the “expletives deleted” he expelled from the other end.

I came back to the family. “The funeral home had it on their calendar for tomorrow,” I said. “They are on their way.”

In a few minutes a pickup truck and hearse came speeding through the winding roads of the cemetery. They screeched to a halt. The funeral director got out, mouth washed out with soap. Two burly men got out of the truck. They lifted the casket out, placed it near where we were, and for the only time in my life, I conducted a service over a body before a grave had been dug.

A body without a grave. A tomb without a body. Sometimes people just make mistakes.

## II.

But the empty tomb may also mean that the one buried has been *raised from the dead*, which is what happens in this event that transcends event.

When the women, perplexed, step into the tomb, they see, rather suddenly, “two men in dazzling clothes [stand] beside them,” Their reaction moves from perplexity to terror. All they know to do is to bow their faces to the ground, as one might do in the presence of a god or in the presence of one by whom one was expecting to be killed.

But the two men in dazzling clothes are neither gods nor killers. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” they say. “He is not here, but has risen.”

Then they say to the stunned and silent women:

*“Remember. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” “Remember how he told you...”*

Then the women *remember* [Christ’s] words, and returning from the tomb, they tell all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

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Perhaps the most important words the men in dazzling clothes speak to the women may not be, ironically, “He is risen.” Rather, the most important words *may* be “Remember...remember how he told you.”

The reason these words are so important is that they are *instructive*. They *chart the way* the women come to *trust* the message that Christ is risen – and as such they form a way *we* can come to such *trust* as well.

You see, for these women, as for many of us in this room, belief in the resurrection

- Is not something that drops down from heaven as an unexpected miracle, miraculous as it is.
- Belief in the resurrection is not simply a feel-good, fairy-tale ending to an uplifting story.
- Belief in the resurrection is not belief in a reversal of fortune – an unexpected inheritance, a winning lottery ticket, a long-lost sibling suddenly showing up at our doorstep.

On the contrary our belief in the resurrection is a trust that *grows out of* and is *connected to* what we come to know of God in Christ over the course of our lives. Thus, the way we come to *trust* that Christ is *risen* is to *remember* all we have *heard, learned* about, and *experienced* of Christ in the *church* and in the *world* during the time we have been his followers, whether that time has only recently begun or has extended virtually our entire lives.

In my experience, our ability to *trust* in the resurrection and live both *in its power* and *toward its promise* grows out of what we *learn*, day in and day out, seeking to follow Christ, seeking to do the right thing, seeking to be a part of the church: singing the hymns, listening to the sermons, working alongside others in the *church* kitchen or *soup* kitchen, slowly but surely developing relationships with people we respect and trust. “Remember,” the men in dazzling clothes say. “Remember how he told you...” It is the *memories* we form that form the *trust* we develop.

So even if this is your first time in this or any church, I ask you, that as flawed and abusive, petty and exclusive, quarrelsome and intrusive as any religious organization can be, come back to worship next week, and the next, and the next. Take it slowly, patiently, persistently. Over time you will find yourself hearing words Jesus said “while he was still in Galilee,” and soon you will recognize that you have heard those words before. They will begin to mean something to you. You will remember. And what you remember will begin to bring you life. I promise.

### III.

Now back to Tiger Woods.

Concerning his win at the Masters’ last Sunday, *Washington Post* columnist David von Drehle writes:

At 43, [Tiger] Woods is old in golf years. The rash power of his youthful swing has taken its toll through four back surgeries. So when he stepped [up to]...the 12th hole on Sunday...two strokes behind with seven holes to play, he faced the hole that is the most famous test on the most famous course in the United States....

His dream of winning another major title seemed just beyond his grasp...

If ever a moment cried out for heroics, surely this was it. Take aim at that seductive patch of grass [that marks the 12<sup>th</sup> hole]...Gamble...Throw caution to the...wind...Stick the ball so close to the hole that the soft thud of impact shakes up the entire contest. ...

Half the [players] in the hunt for the title tried [such heroics]...and each fell short, ending up in the water. [But] Woods played *conservatively, knowledgeably, prudently*, taking aim at the big white beach and landing his ball safely on the green between the traps. Two putts later, he walked away with a share of the lead and a clear path of victory...

“I was just trying to *plod* my way around the golf course,” Woods said... As a young man, he was anything but *plodding*. He slashed, he whipped, he crushed, he conquered.

Now he was content to be...*patient*...to...*control [his] emotions*...The defining shot of his life was the shot he *didn't* attempt, the risk he was ...*prudent [not]* to take...<sup>2</sup>

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When the casket was in place and we gathered around it for the graveside, I read words of a prayer I read at every funeral:

...deep within the human heart is an unquenchable trust that life does not end with death, that the Father, who made us, will care for us beyond the bounds of vision, even as He has cared for us in this earthly world.

Of all the promises I make as a pastor this is the one of which I am *most sure*: “Life does not end with death.”<sup>3</sup>

I have not come to such trust from *men dressed in dazzling white* who dropped down from heaven and spoke to me at an empty tomb. Neither have I come to such trust from any “*heroics*” I have performed on the golf course (which I don't play) nor in any other arena of life.

I have come to *such trust* only through a lifetime of *plodding* around the church, *listening* to the words of Christ, as they are *preached* and *sung*, *taught* and *lived* out, absorbing the faith as a child in a large church, as a teenager in a small church, as a minister in four different churches.

“Remember...how he told you,” the men say. “Remember how he told you.” “Remember.”

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

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<sup>2</sup> David van Drehle, “Tiger Woods Defining Shot Was the One He Didn't Take,” *The Washington Post* 4/17/10.

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Common Worship* (Philadelphia: 1946), 211.