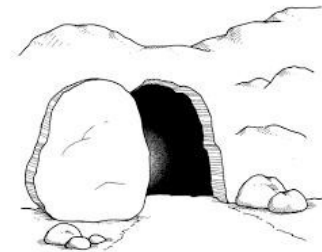




*The
Empty
Tomb*



Looking Unto Jesus-The Empty Tomb

Hebrews 12:2, “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

In the last installment of our series, we turned our gaze to the cross. We surveyed the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died.

And if that would have been the end of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, then the story of this Galilean Carpenter would have been no different than the thousands of other people who were executed by Rome or some cult leader that was able to get some people to follow him. But the cross is not where the story of Jesus ends.

1st Corinthians 15:1-10, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to

you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am....”



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Conclusion

But in order to join him, we must follow in his steps.

Romans 6:3-5, “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection. Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.”

Paul tells us that if we will follow that form of doctrine, and if our faith moves us to repent of our sins, confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and be buried in baptism, we will follow in His steps and we will be resurrected to eternal life.

Do you want to have that hope today? Do you want to have that confident expectation that one day you will rise from that grave and meet Jesus around the throne of God?

Jesus has paid the price for you sins. He died on the cross, was buried, and on the third day rose again. And because of it, we can look into the empty tomb and find hope.

All we have to do is “Look Unto Jesus.” Look unto him as our example. Look unto him as our source of doctrine. Look unto him for our salvation. And look unto him as our source of hope. And when we truly look unto Him, it will move us to obey his word. It will move us to lay down our lives for Him and follow him all the days of our lives.

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That is probably the best way that I can describe how I view death now. It is no longer a destination. It is something that we will go through. But we have the confident expectation that, just like my dad brought me home safely home all those times, our Heavenly Father will bring us home safely to the other side.

On the top shelf of one of the bookcases in my office sits an old, black Bible. It is quite a bit more worn and quite a bit older than the Bible that I normally use. I don't know how much money it is worth, but I can tell you it is one of my prized possessions in this life. It belonged to my grandfather, Clifton Crouch. He was a man that I loved very much. He was a good man, a man who loved his family, an elder of the church who served God and his people for all of his life. He passed away 14 or 15 years ago. From time to time, I still think about him. I still miss him. I wish sometimes I could talk to him and sit down and have a meal with him, that I could show him my son. And everyone once in a while, I pull this old Bible down from the shelf and flip through it, and think about how long it has been since I saw him.

But I don't weep in the same

way as those that have no hope. Sure I grieved when he died and still miss him today. But I look into the empty tomb of Jesus and I find hope. Hope that someday I will see Granddaddy again. Hope that I will see my grandmother again. Hope that I will see people like Gerald Hanley and Ralph Gage again. Hope that I will see my mom again. And hope that I will see Jesus. That I will see with my eyes, the glorious vision that we find in Revelation 5, the Lamb of God, seated by the throne of God, the innumerable company of angels gathered around the throne. And I will join in that chorus and will sing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.Blessing and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever." And I will cast my crown down at his feet. And be home for all eternity.

I have that hope because Jesus Christ died for my sins. But not just that he died, but that he rose again. That he took my sins in his body. That he took them to the grave. But the grave could not hold him.

The tomb is empty. HE IS RISEN. And because of it, we have HOPE that one day we will join him

After Jesus dies on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus so that he could bury him. Joseph was apparently a somewhat wealthy man and a member of the Sanhedrin, who had come to believe in Jesus. He, along with Nicodemus (another member of the Sanhedrin), takes the body of Jesus and prepares it for burial. They cover the body with the traditional ointments and fragrances. They wrap it with linen. And late Friday afternoon, they placed the body in a new tomb in a garden. And then, a large stone was rolled in front of the door of the tomb.

The Jews had heard Jesus say in the past that he would rise from the dead. So to prevent his disciples from stealing the body and then claiming that Jesus had risen, they ask and are granted a group of soldiers to guard the tomb and a wax seal was placed on the entrance.

All the while, the Apostles and followers of Jesus have fled and are in shock and despair. This man who they thought was the Messiah was just murdered like a common criminal. And he is now dead and buried.

As Friday turns to Saturday and then Saturday turns to Sunday, some of the women followers of

Jesus decide that they are going to make a trip to the tomb where the body had been laid. They want to pay their respects and to further prepare the body with oil and fragrances. So Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus, and a few other women make their way toward the garden.

But as they approach the tomb, they see something unusual. They don't see the guards standing around the tomb. Instead they see that the stone has been rolled away. They take a look inside the tomb, but there is no body. Jesus is gone.

Mary Magdalene apparently panics a little bit and takes off back towards home. She loved Jesus. He had healed her and changed her life. And this man that she followed and dedicated her life to had just been murdered. He had been humiliated. And now someone has stolen the body? She runs back to town to tell Peter and John the horrible news.

The rest of the women stay there. And then, suddenly, they see two men sitting in the tomb. Their clothes gleamed like lightning. One was sitting where the head of Jesus was laid and the other where his feet would have been. No body, only angels.

Instead of the darkness of death, they see the shining lights sent from heaven.

Still, though, they don't understand. They kneel before the angels. The angels know why they are here. They tell the women that Jesus is no longer here. He is no longer dead. HE IS RISEN and they need to go and tell others that Jesus is raised from the dead.

While all of this is going on, Mary Magdalene is racing back to town to tell Peter and John that Jesus can't be found. She finally reaches their homes and shares this awful news. Jesus is gone and no one knows where he is.

As soon as Peter and John hear, they bolt out the door and head to the tomb. John apparently was a little younger and a little faster than Peter, so he reaches the tomb first. He kneels down and looks inside, but he doesn't step inside the tomb. No body. No Jesus. At first sight, it appears that Mary Magdalene was right. Who took the body?

But then Peter gets there and he goes into the tomb. He doesn't know what to make of it. The body is gone. And he doesn't know where Jesus is.

John takes another look. He sees strips of linen lying there. He sees the burial cloth that had been around the head of Jesus folded up by itself. And it dawns on him. If someone stole the body, why would they take the time to remove the linens from a decaying body? And why would they take the time to neatly fold up the linen napkin? This wasn't the scene of a grave robbery. This was the scene of a resurrection, the scene of a man that was in control. And John realized what had happened. Peter and John then head back home.

Shortly after they left, Mary Magdalene arrives back at the tomb. She has been running up the miles on the odometer today, so she is a little slower getting back there than Peter and John. But as she gets back to the tomb all she can do is kneel down and cry. Then she looks into the tomb. She sees those two angels that had spoken to other women. They ask her, "Why are you crying?" And she tells them, "Someone has stolen the body of Jesus and I don't know where he is."

Then Mary turns around. She sees a man approaching. She thinks that he is a gardener. But this is no gardener. Maybe it was the tears in her eyes. But

temporary, this world isn't your home. That something better is waiting for you.

Josh McDowell once said, "No matter how devastating our struggles, disappointments, and troubles are, they are only temporary. No matter what happens to you, no matter the depth of tragedy or pain you face, no matter how death stalks you and your loved ones, the Resurrection promises you a future of immeasurable good."

This echoes the sentiments of Paul when he wrote in 2nd Corinthians 2:9, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard...the things which God has prepared for them that love him."

And this hope and assurance that this world is not our home, leads us to the hope, the confident expectation, that death is not the end to our story.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth didn't end when Joseph of Arimathea placed his body in that tomb. And one day, when my wife and son are standing by my grave, it won't be the end of my story. My death will not be end of life for me. It will be the beginning of my eternal life in Heaven. Mozart once said that death is the key that unlocks our true happiness. But how can

that be? Death is scary. Death is unknown. We cry when we go to funerals because they are sad and seem so final. But Jesus Christ faced the grave and he faced death. And he overcame it.

"O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory? But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." And that victory was completed when the tomb was empty.

So now, no longer must we live life in fear of death. Death is not the end. It is a transition, like when we fall asleep at night and wake up next day.

I remember, as a child, taking many trips up to Arkansas to see my Grandparents. It is only about a 5 ½ hour drive up to Northwest Arkansas from Dallas. But to a child that seems like an eternity. This was before iPhones, iPads, and DVD players. So what I would often do is sleep. I would lie in the back of the van and take a nap. And when I would wake up, I would be home. I would have arrived. I wouldn't remember the journey that I had taken. I would wake up, home, knowing that my father had brought me safely to my destination.

hope as a Christian, is it like that? That I am wishing for something to happen, but am a little skeptical in my heart?

1st Peter 1:13, 21, “Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you... Who by him do we believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God.”

Peter says that we should have hope unto the end, that our faith and hope might be in God. So what does that hope mean?

In a recent version of Basic Christianity, Scott Gage wrote about hope and what it means. He defined hope not as wishful thinking, but as a “CONFIDENT EXPECTATION of things to come.” It is more than just wishing something would happen. It is having full confidence and faith that what we have been promised will come to pass. That these great and precious promises that we have been given will come true.

And when we look into the empty tomb, we don't see the end of the story of Jesus we see the hope of a resurrected Savior.

1st Corinthians 15:23, “But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.”

Because the tomb is empty and because of the promise that we will follow in his steps, we can look into the empty tomb and find hope. We see the hope and assurance that this world is not my home. This life and this world is not where I belong and is not my ultimate destiny.

Christ endured the pain and shame and horror of the cross knowing that at the end of his work and life here there awaited him eternal glory and a home in heaven. Despite his circumstances, despite his troubles and trials that he endured, he had the confident expectation that he would return home to his father in heaven.

We too have that same hope. So when we see the news and we see how messed up the world can be sometimes, anchor yourself to the hope (the confident expectation) that this world is not your home. When you receive bad news, when your friends or family abandon you, or you receive that medical diagnoses that burdens your heart, stand firm and know that whatever comes your way is only

she didn't know who this man was.

The man asks her, “Why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?” Mary tells him that she is looking for Jesus and if he will just tell her what has happened to him and his body, she will go and take care of it. But then the man says, “Mary.”

Maybe it was the tone of his voice. Maybe it was the way that that name sounded from those lips. Maybe Jesus just decided to reveal himself. For whatever reason, she now knew: This was no gardener; this was the resurrected savior. This was Jesus Christ.

HE IS RISEN. The tomb was empty, not because someone stole the body but because he is risen. The tomb was empty and that tomb is still empty today. No one could deny that the tomb of Jesus was empty. Not the Romans. Not the Jews. Not the followers of Jesus. The tomb was empty. And the tomb of Jesus is still empty today.

Brooke Foss Westcott once said, “There is no historic incident better or more variously supported than the resurrection of Christ.” Friend and foe alike CANNOT deny that the tomb of Jesus is empty. And the empti-

ness of that tomb forces us to look inside of it, like so many did that Easter Sunday 2000 years ago. It forces us to answer the question, “What will we do with Jesus? And what do we do with his empty tomb?”

If we look into that empty tomb, what do we see?

Anger?

Some people looked into the empty tomb of Jesus and they were angry. The Pharisees and religious leaders looked into the empty tomb and were filled with hate and anger. They couldn't deny that the body wasn't there. They even had soldiers dispatched to make sure that no one came to steal the body. But they couldn't keep Jesus in the tomb. And they couldn't deny that Jesus was no longer there. Once they heard from the soldiers that Jesus had risen from the dead, instead of accepting Jesus, they tried to cover it up. They offered bribes to the soldiers. They couldn't deny the resurrection. They couldn't deny the empty tomb. So they got angry. They tried everything that they could to stamp out Jesus and his followers. They threw people in jail. They had people executed.

They knew that if people began to accept the resurrection of Je-

sus, then they would have to accept that this Jesus, whom they had crucified, was now Lord and Christ. And they were not willing to do that. That would mean that they would no longer be the rulers of the people and rulers of their lives. So they got angry.

And there are still people like that today. They look into the empty tomb, they hear the story of the resurrection of Jesus, and they are forced with the same dilemma. Accept Jesus as the resurrected king of my life, or rebel against him with anger and pride and with hate.

That is why you see people try to come up with theory after theory on why the tomb was empty: The followers of Jesus stole the body; The swoon theory that Jesus wasn't really dead; The idea that the followers of Jesus all hallucinated and imagined seeing him.; Or just denying the gospel narrative.

But all of those theories have been proven to be false. The only explanation for the empty tomb is that JESUS IS RISEN. He is who he said he is. He is the resurrected king of his kingdom. And no amount of anger or pride or hate will ever change that fact.

Confusion and Fear?

Some people looked into the tomb and they were confused and scared. That is what actually happened to most of the apostles. They thought that Jesus was supposed to be the king. He was supposed to be the Messiah that overthrew Roman oppression. But now he was killed and the body was missing.

Sometimes we can begin to think, "How could the apostles be so dumb! Didn't they listen to Jesus? Didn't they know that he said he was going to rise from the grave?" But, it is important to remember that the apostles were experiencing this in real time. We have the luxury of reading the scriptures, knowing how the story ends. The apostles had no such perspective. So when they see Jesus captured and executed and laid in a tomb, they thought that things were over. They didn't understand. And they thought the mission had failed.

Some went back to their jobs. Some doubted. They lock themselves in the Upper Room, questioning what their next move was. Despite the fact that they had heard Jesus and his teaching, they had walked with him for 3 years, saw his miracles, heard him say that we would rise

again the third day, they still doubted. They saw their circumstances. They saw death and they doubted.

Aren't we the same way sometimes? We see what is going on in the world and doubt can begin to creep in. We see suicide bombers kill dozens of people at an airport. I was in Chicago recently and saw a news story of a 22 year old man who shot a 9 year old boy in the head 7 times as part of a gang initiation. We see innocent people killed. We see death and destruction and wickedness.

But what about when the news hits even closer to home? We have friends and loved ones who hurt us or abandon us. We receive medical diagnoses or a loved one passes away and we wonder, "Where are you God?" I thought that life was supposed to be abundant and great and wonderful as a Christian. Why do I have to deal with this loss or this circumstance or this disease or this death?

Sure, we hear the word of God; we know the promises that He has given us, we see the empty tomb. But we, like most of the apostles, begin to ask, "Where is Jesus?" And even though we have seen the empty tomb and looked inside of it, we let doubt

and fear creep in. And instead of living the abundant, faithful life of a child of God, we are stuck in the upper rooms of our lives and churches, not sure what to do.

Hope?

But then there are some that look into the empty tomb of Jesus and see something else. Not anger and hate. Not doubt and fear. Instead, they see hope.

John looked into the empty tomb and the scriptures say that he believed. He saw the burial cloths. He saw the neatly folded napkin. He saw the empty tomb and the evidence and he believed. And that belief led to hope.

But what is hope? That can be one of those words that we hear and we read it in the scriptures, but we don't fully understand what it implies or means.

You know what? I hope that Texas A&M wins the national championship next football season! But I don't really think it's going to happen. I HOPE that the stock market goes up about 50% per year for the next 25 years or so until I retire. But I don't really think it's going to happen. When I say that I have