

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 8, 2007
Easter Sunday**

THE ALMOST EMPTY TOMB

John 20:1-9

On their drive to church one Easter Sunday, a mother told her children the Easter story. “This is the day we celebrate Jesus coming back to life,” she explained. Right away, her three-year-old son piped up from the back seat and asked: “Will He be in church today?”

Maybe some of you have wondered the same thing. If Jesus really rose from the dead, if He really is alive, will He be in church today? Is He here with us right now?

I want you to know that though we cannot see Him, and though we may not always feel His presence, Jesus really is here today. The risen Lord Jesus is right here among us. He promised that He would always be with us (Matthew 28:20). And He has never lied to us. So you can be sure both that Jesus is alive and that He is present with us today, just as He is always present when we meet together in His name to worship the true and living God in spirit and in truth.

I want to talk with you today about what Peter and John discovered on Easter morning when they went to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed. The empty tomb, it is fair to say, is one of the great historical evidences of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But the startling fact is that when Peter and John arrived at the tomb on Easter morning, it was not quite empty. Almost empty, but not quite. What they found there was so striking that suddenly the light came on for John. He understood what had taken place and believed in the resurrection.

Before we talk about exactly what they found in the tomb, I want to tell you what they did not find. They did not find the body of Jesus – which, to be honest, was what they and Mary Magdalene did expect to find in the tomb. Had the body of Jesus been there, they would not have been surprised at all. It was the fact that the body of Jesus was gone that so distressed Mary Magdalene and stirred Peter and John into action to check it out for themselves. Like Mary Magdalene, when they got to the tomb, they discovered that the body of Jesus was not there.

Last month, as you may know, more than four million people tuned in to watch a Discovery Channel documentary called “*The Lost Tomb Of Jesus.*” The documentary, a project of “*Titanic*” director James Cameron, put forth the claim that Jesus married Mary Magdalene (shades of Dan Brown and *The DaVinci Code*), had a son named Judah, and they were buried together in a recently discovered tomb in Jerusalem. The tomb in question was actually discovered in 1980, and the claims of Cameron have been dismissed as nonsense by archaeologists ever since the discovery of the tomb. Despite all the media hype the documentary received, there just isn’t any sound reason to buy what

Cameron is trying to sell and to believe that this is – or could be – “the lost tomb of Jesus.”

Commenting on the documentary’s claims, Greg Koukl, who heads a ministry called Stand to Reason, points out that the proclamation of His resurrection was part of the earliest, original testimony regarding Jesus. And it was made by the very same people whom the documentary suggests knew that Jesus’ bones were actually secretly buried in Jerusalem. Why, he asks, would so many of them die for this lie when they *knew* it was a lie? It just doesn’t add up.

What Peter and John and Mary Magdalene did not find when they went to the tomb on Easter morning was the body of Jesus.

Strangely, while some 75 to 80 percent of Americans believe in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, some professing Christians reject the idea that Jesus literally rose from the dead. John Shelby Spong, a retired Episcopal bishop from New Jersey, says in his book *Jesus for the Non-Religious* that “to literalize Easter has become the defining heresy of traditional Protestant and Catholic Christianity.” How is that for turning doctrine on its head? To believe in the physical, bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus as the Gospels and other New Testament books plainly teach, and as the church has always affirmed, is heresy, according to Spong. While the resurrection is “profoundly real” for Spong in some spiritual sense, it is obvious he thinks the bones of Jesus are still in the tomb.

Another prominent theologian, Roman Catholic John Dominic Crossan, dismisses the literalness of the resurrection of Christ and says it is best understood as a metaphor. But if the resurrection is merely a metaphor, then – once again – the bones of Jesus are still in the tomb. And if that is the case, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:19, we who have put our hope in Christ are to be pitied more than all men. Or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: “If all we get out of Christ (and the metaphor of His resurrection) is a little inspiration for a few short years, we’re a pretty sorry lot.”

But Peter and John and Mary Magdalene did not find the body of Jesus when they went to the tomb on Easter morning. And the resurrection, my friends, is not merely a metaphor.

What did they find when they arrived at the tomb? The body of Jesus was gone, but the tomb was not quite empty. Almost, but not quite. All Mary Magdalene knew when she got to the tomb early on Sunday morning and saw the stone moved away from the entrance was that the body of Jesus wasn’t there. She didn’t know who had taken Him or where. Clearly the thought of Jesus being raised from the dead didn’t enter her mind. She ran off to tell the disciples what she had found, and Peter and John (“the other disciple, the one Jesus loved”) ran hard to the tomb to see for themselves.

John got there first, ahead of Peter, and peered into the tomb. But he didn’t go in. Possibly he was simply waiting, out of respect, until Peter got there. Or he may have

initially thought that the body of Jesus was in fact there, and he did not want to make himself ceremonially unclean by going into the tomb.

Whatever the case, when Peter got there, he barreled on in without any hesitation. Only then, after Peter had gone in, did John enter as well. What they found, the Bible says, was not the body of Jesus, only the graveclothes in which His body had been wrapped for burial. These graveclothes consisted of strips of linen used to cover His lifeless body and a burial cloth, wrapped in the shape of a turban, for His head.

What was so unusual is that the graveclothes were *not* strewn about in a mess or left in a heap, as one might expect if a grave robber had come to steal the body. Instead, the linen strips for the body and the burial cloth for the head with all the spices used in Jewish burial were lying there undisturbed, as if Jesus had simply passed through them. The head cloth was separate from the other clothes. It was lying by itself, at just the right distance from the linen cloths that had enveloped Jesus' body. Even more striking, it was still rolled up in the shape of a head. When John says in verse 7 that the head cloth was "folded up by itself," it means it was twirled about itself.

While Peter at this point was only puzzled by what he saw in the tomb, it says in verse 8 that John "saw and believed." That is, he saw with understanding. And he believed. He believed in the resurrection before He saw Jesus alive again with his own eyes. It was not simply because of the empty tomb, but because of the way the graveclothes were "left behind" in the almost empty tomb his eyes were suddenly opened to the truth of what had happened.

James Montgomery Boice suggests that John may have explained his belief in Jesus' resurrection and the reasons for it to Peter like this: "Don't you see, Peter, that no one has moved the body or disturbed the graveclothes? They are lying here exactly as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea left them when they put the body of Jesus here in the tomb. But the body is gone. It has not been stolen. It has not been moved. Clearly, it must have passed through the cloths, leaving them as we see them now. Jesus must be risen."

As John Stott says, an examination of the graveclothes convinced John of the reality, and indicated the nature, of the resurrection.

By itself, of course, the almost empty tomb is not enough to prove or confirm the message of Christ's resurrection. But the fact that the tomb was empty – or almost empty – was critical for the disciples' claim that Christ had risen to have any credence. All that was necessary to discredit the claim of Christ's resurrection was to produce His body.

But the tomb *was* empty on Easter morning. Or almost empty. And there is the evidence not only of the almost empty tomb and the undisturbed graveclothes found there, but also the testimony of more than 500 witnesses who attested that they saw the risen Lord Jesus alive after He was raised from the dead.

Now, some of you might say: “Pastor, what you’ve said so far sounds logical. It makes sense. But what does the resurrection of Jesus have to do with my life? What is the significance of Easter for me?” Or, as Lon Solomon up at McLean Bible Church likes to say: “So what?” So what if the Easter story is true and Jesus really did rise again from the dead?

Here is what it means: If the resurrection of Jesus is true – and it is – then you and I have got to take Jesus seriously, because the resurrection shows that He is who He claimed to be.

Jesus made some pretty far-out statements about Himself. He said, for example:

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die (John 11:25-26).

He said:

I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never go hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6:35).

He said:

I am the light of the world (John 8:12).

In John 8:58, He made this astonishing statement:

Before Abraham was born, I am.

He said:

(I have come) to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

On one occasion Jesus cleared the moneychangers out of the temple courts in Jerusalem. They had turned the temple area into something like a giant flea market, so He drove them all out. Offended by His actions, some of the Jewish leaders demanded to know: “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove you have the authority to do this?” Jesus said: “Destroy this temple” (meaning His body) “and I will raise it again in three days.”

When the high priest asked Him if He was the Christ, the promised Messiah, the very Son of God, Jesus answered:

I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven (Matthew 26:63-64; Mark 14:61-62).

In John 14:6, Jesus said:

I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

That is a pretty bold claim, isn't it? He didn't say: "I'm one way" or "I'm a good way" or "I'm one of many ways." He said: "I'm *the* way." The one and only way. Rick Warren says the idea that all roads lead to heaven is stupid. (That's his word. But he's right.) He says it is like saying you can dial any phone number and reach home. There is only one number that will get you home.

Jesus also said: "I am *the* truth." The implication is that any other way is not the truth.

Bottom line: Jesus claimed to be the very incarnation – the embodiment – of God with us. And His resurrection from the dead demonstrates that He was and is who He claimed to be. The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus has the power He claimed to have. Power over sin. Power to forgive sin. Even power over death. And it means that Jesus did what He promised to do. Three times Jesus told His disciples what was going to happen to Him. He told them three times that He would be betrayed and condemned to death, that He would be mocked and flogged and killed. And three times He told them He would rise again from the dead after three days (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34).

It happened just as Jesus said it would. The resurrection shows that Jesus is who He claimed to be, and you and I are fools if we do not take His claims seriously.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus means that He has the power to transform both the way we live and the way we die.

Listen to what the Bible says in Colossians 2:13-14:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature (that is, when your heart was far from God), God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins... He took it away, nailing it to the cross.

Jesus did not come to condemn us for all our sins and transgressions, for all the mistakes and messes we've made with our lives. He came to save us. He came to forgive us. He came to set us free from our involuntary servitude to sin. He came to set us free from the weight of the burden of our guilt for all the ways we've sinned and blown it and messed up. He came to set us free from all that, so we could begin to live life as it is meant to be – in a relationship of trust and gratitude and love and glad surrender to the gracious reign of God in our lives.

In His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, Jesus showed that He has the power and the authority to do all that. He has the power to set you free from the

burden of sin and guilt in your life, no matter what you've done or what secrets you've brought with you to church today. Jesus can set you free, if you will come to Him just as you are, confess your sins and turn away from them in a spirit of true repentance, and trust in the saving work of Christ on the cross to cover over your sins. The great news of the gospel is that there is now no condemnation for those who belong to Christ in faith (Romans 8:1).

Not only can Jesus set you free from the past and the burden of all your sin and guilt, He can give you wisdom and strength for the challenges of living life in these extraordinary times.

In Ephesians 1:19-20, Paul speaks of God's "incomparably great power for us who believe," a power which is "like the working of His mighty strength, which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead." You see, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to you and me, to help us weather the storms, to face the challenges, to handle the hardships, and to rise above the problems we will inevitably encounter in this world. The same power God used to raise Jesus from the dead is available to you in your life today, no matter what you may be going through. Or what may be ahead. God is with you in the midst of it. He promised He would never abandon you, and God does not lie. And His grace and power are sufficient.

There is one last thing we need to see regarding the resurrection of Jesus and its significance for us. It gives us confidence and hope for the future. It enables us to see that though death is "the last enemy" as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:26, the last enemy does not have the last word. It did not have the final say on Jesus. And it will not have the last word on you and me.

Don and Harriet Colley told me the other day about a friend of theirs whose battle with cancer is almost over. Their friend is near death's door. But she and her husband, their family and friends can face her impending death with confidence and peace because of the hope they have in Christ – the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead through Jesus Christ our Lord. His resurrection is the promise and guarantee of the resurrection to eternal life for all who belong to Christ in faith.

Heather Herbert and her family said good-bye to Heather's mother in a memorial service out in Missouri yesterday. It is hard to say those good-byes. But Heather and her family did so knowing that though her mother is absent from the body, she is now at home with the Lord. And we who are in Christ, we who know Jesus as Savior and Lord of our lives, have the assurance that we will be reunited in the day of resurrection with loved ones who have gone before us in faith.

Billy Graham, now 88 years old and in frail health, recently wrote:

"More than ever, Ruth and I rejoice in the hope we have of heaven because of Christ's death and resurrection. Often in recent days I have recalled Paul's words in Romans 8:18: 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth

comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.’ Someday all the heartaches and sufferings of this life will be over, and ‘we will be with the Lord forever’ (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Because of the cross we have forgiveness, and because of the empty tomb we have hope!”

So the resurrection of Jesus can transform not only the way we live life here and now. It can transform the way we face death itself.

”Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

To Him – to the Christ of the cross and the Christ of the almost empty tomb – be glory, honor and praise, now and forever. May He live in us and reign in us always, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.