

## ***The Open Tomb***

Our New Testament reading is Matthew 28:1-10. Matthew's gospel features women witnesses of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The number and identity of all of the women involved in various visits to tomb is indefinite, but it's clear that God used them in a unique way as witnesses of this most crucial event for the Christian faith.

Follow as I read **Matthew 28:1-10**:

*28 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup> For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."<sup>8</sup> So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

Although The Church of the Holy Sepulcher may be the site of the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid, I had a greater appreciation for the Garden Tomb, which is outside the city walls, and probably typifies the kind of cave-like tomb into which Joseph laid Jesus' body (27:59f). What impressed me was the large groove in front of the tomb's entrance, upon which the tomb door, a huge stone, was placed. It would have taken a Herculean effort to roll such a stone away. As Mark's account tells us, the women who went to Jesus' tomb in order to anoint his body, which they fully expected to be lying on the shelf inside the tomb, were concerned about finding someone who could roll the stone away from the entrance to allow them entry (16:2f). When the women arrived there was a violent earthquake and the appearance of an angel of the Lord, who "rolled back the stone and sat on it" (2).

The four gospels tell us how God used women as the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, which is remarkable because in this male-dominated culture, the witness of women was not considered credible. Here the women disciples appear much more courageous than the "macho" guards who are frozen stiff by the appearance of the angel.

The Gospel accounts are very clear that the stone was rolled back, not to let Jesus out, but to allow seekers in. When Jesus was raised by the power of God, he was raised with a "transphysical" (NT Wright) body, one that is still tangibly physical, but also one that can transcend the limits of time and space. In his post-resurrection appearances, Jesus ate food with his disciples, who walked and talked with him and even touched his hands and side, with the nail and spear scars. And because his body was trans-physical, Jesus was able to pass through the stone of the tomb, go through the barred door of the Upper Room, and eat with them during his post-resurrection appearances. God sent an angel to remove the stone entrance to make

an “open house,” an open tomb. The stone was rolled away to give access to seekers.

During a vacation week years ago on the Gulf Coast of Florida, on a rainy, overcast day when the beach would not have been enjoyable, my wife prevailed upon me to look at some open houses which were very exclusive and expensive. The realtor who greeted us at the door of a multi-million dollar house, sized us up with our small rental car at the curb, and instinctively knew we weren’t serious customers. As he opened the door to graciously invite us in, he asked sarcastically, “Did you bring your check book with you?” He knew we weren’t serious buyers, but led us through the house nevertheless.

The women who came to the tomb that early Sunday morning were seriously seeking Jesus, but were expecting only his corpse. The truth of Jesus’ promised resurrection hadn’t yet dawned upon them. Although their understanding was weak, their love and devotion for Jesus were strong, and they came prepared to anoint his body with the customary burial spices (Mk.16:1). They didn’t come to the open tomb of Jesus simply out of curiosity. They were serious seekers, and they were about to make an amazing discovery, one that changed the history of the world and one that gives hope and meaning to our lives. The open tomb shows us that our Rescuer King lives, and as his children we have the promise of our own resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus promises our own bodily resurrection. Paul writes to the cynics and skeptics of his day who sought to discredit a future resurrection, that if our bodily resurrection isn’t possible then Jesus wasn’t raised; and if Jesus wasn’t raised, we’re still in our sins. If Jesus isn’t raised, “then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ,” Paul says, “we are to be pitied more than all people” (1 Cor. 15:12-19). Without the hope for *our* resurrection all the promises of God would fall and we’d be in the same condition of despair as the disciples. But the tomb is open, and it’s open for *our* resurrection!

Maybe you’re familiar with this famous story from the Battle of Waterloo:

“In the days prior to electronic communication or twenty-four-hour news reporting, news of great occasions had to be passed on primarily by word of mouth. In nineteenth-century England, the people were anxiously awaiting news of the outcome of the strategic battle of Waterloo (June 18, 1815), where the British forces under General Wellington faced off against the French forces under Napoleon. A signalman was placed on top of Winchester Cathedral with instructions to keep an outlook on the sea. When he received a message, he was to pass it on to another, and on and on. In that way, the news of the outcome of the battle was to be relayed finally to London and then across Britain.

“At long last a ship was sighted through the fog, which on that day lay thick on the channel. The signalman on board sent the first word—*Wellington*. The next word was *defeated*. Then the fog closed in, and the ship could no longer be seen. “Wellington defeated!” The tragic message was sent across England, and a great gloom descended over the countryside. After a few hours the fog lifted, and the signal came again—*Wellington defeated the enemy!* Now the full message went

racing across the countryside again, but this time the nation rejoiced!" (told by James M Boice).

When Jesus died the cruel death on the cross, his followers sank into deep sorrow and despair, thinking their Master was defeated by death and their hopes for his kingdom were dashed. But after three days, "the fog lifted, and the full message came through" (Boice). .

The women came to the truth knowing only that their Master had been crucified, but when they arrived at the open tomb, God revealed the rest of the story. And the fog has been lifted for you and me. We have God's truth written for us. And we have his truth in the courageous witness of the church through the ages and in our time. The earliest eleven apostles were all, with the exception of exiled John, executed as martyrs. They were willing to live and witness boldly and suffer and die courageously because they were absolutely convinced that Jesus rose from the grave.

These women came to the open tomb, heard the words of the angel that Jesus had risen, and experienced with mingled fear and joy this stupendous discovery. The Spirit of God was creating faith in their hearts, even before they encountered the risen Lord, who confirmed their experience of faith. They experienced the reality of faith even before Jesus met them on their way.

When we respond by faith and trust to the word of God, his grace then enables us to see, to understand. We don't understand in order to believe. Although God gives us abundant evidence for faith in his word, we can never arrive at faith through our own understanding. The evidence for Christ and his resurrection is abundant, but we'll never have enough evidence to eliminate the need to simply place our trust in God, and receive his forgiveness for sin and gift of eternal life. We don't understand in order to believe. Rather, we believe in order to understand. At the moment of surrender to Christ we understand. We say, "Ah hah! Now I see!"

With a friendly, ordinary greeting Jesus met these women who were seeking him, and their response was to come to him and fall at his feet in worship (9). When we realize the worthiness of the risen Lord Jesus, our response should also be to worship him. When we worship the risen Lord Jesus, he turns our doubts and fears into faith and trust. Seeing Jesus, realizing he, the eternal Son and Savior is alive and with us, fears melt away, the fog is lifted. Just like in England, when the people heard "Wellington defeated," they were discouraged and afraid. But now we've heard, not Jesus defeated," as the women thought at first, but "Jesus defeated death." The tomb is empty.

The tomb was opened, the stone rolled away, not only to allow us to come and see but also to enable us to go and tell. We're not to remain inside the "tomb" of our private experience. From both the angel (7) and from the risen Jesus (10) the women were commanded to go and tell what they had seen and experienced. "Go quickly and tell the disciples" that Jesus is risen and wants to meet with them. Our experience with Jesus is not something we keep to ourselves. These women knew exactly what the message was which they were to deliver—"Jesus is risen!" The one who was crucified and laid in the tomb is now alive! And God has revealed to us as

clearly, as to these women eye-witnesses, that the crucified Savior is now the risen Son. The tomb is open for others and open for us to go and tell others.

God continues to choose the most unlikely to be his followers and witnesses. You may think of yourself as unworthy or unqualified, but whatever your situation or social standing, it's at least equal to that of these women. All you need is to trust that Jesus lives, to have experienced his saving grace and to be filled with his joy-inducing presence. Jesus, and not your credentials, is the one who makes your witness credible and convincing. It was the courage of Peter and John, contrasted with their ordinariness and lack of scholarly credentials, that made onlookers aware that they had been with Jesus (Acts 5:13). God doesn't require your ability or self-confidence. You need only visit the open tomb and know Jesus lives.

The message we are privileged to take is one of grace, mercy and forgiveness from the loving, crucified and risen Lord. Jesus instructed the women to take the news of his resurrection to his brothers (10). These disciples had forsaken him and their leader, Simon Peter, had denied him despite Jesus' warnings. But Jesus called them his brothers, despite their sins and failures. Everyone's invited into the open tomb.

You may think that because of some shameful failure in the past you're disqualified for entrance, and much less are qualified to invite others. But the example of the disciples tells us that all Jesus wants is our brokenness and he'll transform us into his effective, convincing witnesses. People may remember your past failures and perhaps even your shameful past, but Jesus will use the past to show the contrast with what he's done for you and is doing in your life now. They may remember your past but also will recognize the difference in your life now.

Today come to the open tomb and see that Jesus lives. The fog will lift just as the stone of unbelief and fear has been rolled away. Come and see. If there's still a fog over your life that leaves you in depression or despair, the fog will lift as you look to Jesus. You may think the tomb is sealed, but if you look to Jesus in faith, you'll see the tomb is open. The stone has been rolled away in order for you to see the risen Savior, Jesus. Hear this good news of the risen Lord Jesus, who will change your life and the lives of those around you. The tomb is open, the fog is lifted. Jesus lives!