

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Resurrection of Our Lord
April 20, 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

The Empty Tomb: A Place of Life

“I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever!” (Revelation 1:18)

In his name, dear brothers and sisters of our Lord,

Business is thriving at the Whitelight Casket Company of Dallas, Texas. Have you heard about this? The company has introduced the “art casket” for those who wouldn’t be caught dead in something routine. No longer must the consumer choose merely between a traditional wooden box and a boring bronze coffin. If you are a golfer, you might choose the popular “Fairway to Heaven” model; other popular styles of personalized caskets include a beach scene, the New York skyline, or even a model that looks like a postal package that says in bold, red letters, “Return to Sender.”

Does that sound like a novel idea? The truth is, individualized coffins as personalized “final statements” are not so new after all. That’s essentially what the great pyramids of Egypt are. They are over-the-top burial places for Egyptian kings, who wanted to make a grand statement about themselves even after they died. In ancient Egypt, tomb preparation began long before a person’s death, with craftsmen engineering a coffin to make a statement revealing what that person had accomplished in life. They did this especially in preparation for impressively meeting the gods—at least that’s what some Egyptians believed. Others dreamed of an afterlife for everyone like a calm, everlasting picnic on the sunny banks of the Nile River, while still others planned to be reincarnated into a fresh body and begin another earthly life. Lots of ideas about death and life after death.

Sounds like California in the 21st Century, doesn’t it? Still people have all kinds of ideas about death and life after death. What was once coffin confusion still is today. But not for us. Easter morning for us injects a rock-solid conviction into the confusion about life and death. Easter is God making a final statement to a questioning world. But what is that statement? And what does it mean for us today?

This statement God is making is not made through a decorative casket. This statement is not made by means of an elaborate monument. This statement about life and death is made by something surprising: an *empty* tomb.

Jesus’ empty tomb is a place of life for us. Today let’s listen to an angel explain that to some saddened women—and to us.

1. A life filled with higher expectations

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” (Mark 16:1-3)

The sunrise was waking up their corner of the world, but these women were so tired, so exhausted from the bustle of the Passover and so emotionally drained from recalling the

events of the past two days that suddenly snatched away their Master's life. Look at their emptiness: arms full of spices to anoint a dead body, eyes full of tears, hearts full of disappointment and fear.

Look at the burial spices they're bringing to anoint the dead body of Jesus. Their assumption? Jesus is dead. Their expectation? He's going to stay dead. Take note of their topic of conversation: "Who will roll the stone away?" Their assumption? Jesus is dead. Their expectation? If we're going to get help, someone other than Jesus will have to provide it.

Do you recognize that empty, sinking feeling—the feeling of having nothing good in the present and nothing good to look forward to in the future?

These women had forgotten something: Jesus had promised to die and then rise from the dead. Forgetting Jesus' promises sank their expectations. The women came looking not for Jesus, the almighty Son of God who can do anything, but for Jesus, the humble Nazarene carpenter's son. They came looking not for Jesus, the Lord of Life who had already demonstrated his power over death by raising dead people to life, but for Jesus, the unjustly killed victim of a political conspiracy. No matter how much Jesus had told these women and all his followers that he would die an ugly death—but that death couldn't harm him because he would rise again to life in three days—they still expected much less.

We're often disappointed because God doesn't live up to our expectations. We have wants, we have desires, and often these desires are good. Yet God doesn't grant our wishes. So, we think we're maybe expecting too much from him, and we ratchet down our expectations.

But maybe the problem is not that we expect too much from God. Maybe the problem is that we're looking for too little from him. Easter is God's way of telling us that he's up to something big. The things he undertakes are even bigger than the biggest problems that intimidate us. God is out to actually make dead people alive! God is not only out to make our lives a little better, he's out to give us real life instead of death! Life for our souls right now, and even glorious never-ending life for our bodies. This is big stuff God is up to—cosmic, eternal stuff. And if he can handle bringing his Son back to life and saving the world, he can handle anything.

The angel lifted the women's heads and hearts, and he lifts ours, too. He lifted them back up to higher expectations by pointing them to the place where a dead Jesus would be, but was not. "He has risen! He is not here" (vs. 6). There was nothing to be alarmed about, nothing to be afraid of, nothing to allow low-level expectations. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! Empty hearts and lives are now filled with new expectations, new hopes! Ladies, now drop your spices (you need them no more!) and run for a better reason, to announce to the world that your Savior reigns over sin, death, and the grave, and Satan has been defeated, just as he said. His empty tomb is a place full of life for you!

You can stop expecting to feel only sad and separated because your Christian loved one is dying, or died before you wanted—the empty tomb raises your expectations to anticipate a glorious reunion in heaven: "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Paul exhorts us in 1 Corinthians. "In Christ all will be made alive" (15:20,22). Stop expecting yourself to act like a second-class misfit who can't compete with sin's power and may as well continue giving in to that same temptation. Stop expecting that you just have to live life the way the godless world tells you to, that there's no sense resisting. The empty tomb raises your expectations to a David-like approach to giant obstacles in God's way, facing them with confidence, and stepping up to Satan and every evil influence to announce, "You cannot have your way with me." That, according to the Bible, is true

because of the resurrection. “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, . . . not on earthly things” (Col 3:1,2). You have been raised with Christ. Jesus rose for you, and he connected you to himself in baptism. His power is real in you. His life in you is no joke.

Let's stop expecting from God only an occasional sunny day, relatively good health, and tasty food on the table during the week. He can make the impossible happen. Jesus' empty tomb guarantees for you a life filled with higher expectations, and also a life filled with meaningful contributions.

2. A life filled with meaningful contributions

A caterpillar spins its cocoon and takes its last look at the bright world for a long time. Its creator then transforms it from a slimy, little worm that crawls on the ground into a soaring, beautiful creature of the sky. It's traditional in the Easter season to use the butterfly as a symbol of the physical transformation our bodies will undergo on judgment day. It's also fitting to see in the butterfly our spiritual transformation, which has already taken place—all because of God's work connecting Christ's resurrection with our baptism. The Bible says: “Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:3,4). Easter gives us a sure hope of glorious things to come, more than that, it gives us a new life right now. We are not caterpillars; we are butterflies. Jesus' empty tomb means full life for us.

These women at Jesus' tomb were missing out on that life. They were so consumed with grief and confusion that they had forgotten what Jesus had said. Jesus had told them he would rise! But many of you know how it is—it's hard to hear or remember anything good when the darkness of death surrounds you. These women thought their lives had ended when Jesus had died. But Jesus wasn't dead! The angel reminded them that Jesus had promised it, since they seem to have forgotten. And the angel also told them that they were now alive, not dead, with a new life to live and meaningful contributions to make. Listen: As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" (Mark 16:5-7)

These women had come to the tomb with something in mind. They had thought that all they could do was anoint Jesus' dead body. But the angel said, “Think again! Jesus is alive! And you have the honor of going and telling about it.” Because Jesus was alive, so were they, and they had a meaningful contribution to make. They had thought they were permanent caterpillars. But they weren't; they were glorious butterflies!

But what about the disciples of Jesus? These men had fallen far. They had been so close to Jesus at one time, but then they had fled from him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter had even gone on to deny him. In their minds, they were no longer worthy of bearing the title “disciples,” rather, something like “traitors” or “underachievers” would be more fitting.

But listen again to the angel: But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him. Jesus, who still calls these men his disciples, is more interested in reassurance than revenge. He takes on a personal concern for these friends of his and wants them all, especially Peter who denied him, to know that he will still faithfully fulfill

his promise to meet them in Galilee. There, in Galilee, Jesus will have a secluded location to restore them, reappoint them, and release them to work for him.

See, the new life we celebrate at Easter is about a new glorified life in eternity, but it's also about a new spiritual life for those who think they might have failed so miserably that Jesus would no longer want them. But in love he does.

It's no secret that this sanctuary today is filled with people who have disappointed and deserted Jesus. Let it neither be a secret that the resurrection of Jesus Christ means a fresh start for us all, just like the disciples. It means the bright morning of a new day when "the Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people" (Isa 25:8). Have you been lacking in your worship attendance? Then know that your risen Jesus offers you a fresh, forgiven start to rise up and live anew in a greater appreciation for praising your Savior and hearing his Word every week. Have you been less than willing to give up your selfish desires, maybe treating your life and your body as if they were yours to have fun with? Then know that your risen Jesus offers you a fresh, forgiven start to rise up and live not for yourself, but for him who died for you and was raised again, a life. Have you been limiting your Christian attitude and actions because it might cause you embarrassment? Then know that your risen Jesus offers you a fresh, forgiven start to rise up and live a new life that passionately practices and professes your Christian faith so that others do notice you have a higher allegiance.

Mark tells us about the women who saw Jesus' empty tomb: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb." (Mark 16:8) It can be confusing, figuring out what this means every day—what it means that Jesus died for me and now is alive. It can be confusing, but at the same time it's the best thing we'll ever be involved in. Jesus clarifies things each time we meet him in his Word and in his Supper. Every day brings a new opportunity to see that Easter changes everything. Our lives—no matter how painful they are—are not just long series of disappointments. Our lives are transformed by the touch of the living Jesus. Really, Jesus gives us life itself—genuine life.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's final statement to the world. It's a statement that he's still making. God speaks to the world not through a designer casket, not through a burial place decorated with the trinkets of this earth. God speaks to the world through an *empty* tomb. Listen, because God is speaking to you today: *Christ is alive, and so are you.* Amen.

Thanks to *Places of the Passion: Lenten Resources for 2003* from Northwestern Publishing House for the basic outline of this sermon and additional sermon helps.