

The Empty Tomb

Mark 16: 1-8

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The journey to Jerusalem may have concluded with Jesus' triumphant entry into the city, but that in no way concluded the impact of His life and ministry. In fact, it was just the opposite. The most significant events in Jesus' life took place during those seven remaining days leading up to the discovery of an empty tomb on a Sunday morning. Major portions of all four Gospels are devoted to what Jesus said and did during the last week of his earthly life as well as what happened when the women went to anoint the body of a dead man and instead were confronted with the reality of a living Lord. Let's take a few moments to relive those seven days in Jerusalem before that momentous morning that forever changed the course of human history.

- On Monday morning Jesus returned to the Temple according to the Gospel of Mark and cleaned house. He ran out the corrupt money changers as well as those who were selling doves, little birds that would be offered as sacrifices. Quoting Scripture he said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations" and then He added, "but you have turned it into a den of thieves."
- During the next three days, Jesus returned to the Temple each morning. He taught the growing crowds of people who came to hear Him and He healed those who were sick. The chief priests and scribes saw what was happening and they were both upset and angry. This teacher from Galilee had taken over their Temple. What He was doing could start an uprising. Something had to be done to stop Him.
- Each evening Jesus left the city. Along with the disciples they returned to Bethany, a small village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. On one of the evenings of that week He visited the home of Simon the leper. During the meal a woman came into the room and anointed Jesus with a costly bottle of perfume. At first everyone was amazed by her audacity, but then they began belittling what she had done. Jesus replied that her anointing had prepared His body for burial, an acknowledgement of what would take place later that week.

- Throughout the week Jesus spent a great deal of time with His disciples, sharing with them what they would need to know about the Kingdom of God. Then on Thursday evening He celebrated the Passover with them in the Upper Room. It was a rather solemn occasion, especially when they partook of the bread and the cup which symbolized His death on the cross.
- Arriving at the Garden of Gethsemane later that evening, the disciples fell asleep while Jesus earnestly prayed seeking guidance from His heavenly Father. He knew what was about to happen when Judas arrived with the Temple guards to arrest Him. After a brief moment of resistance, the disciples fled into the evening.
- During the rest of that night Jesus was questioned by the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the Jewish people. They were determined to find Him guilty of blasphemy, pretending to be God. In their eyes that was a capital offense. But they could not execute a person without permission from the Romans. So trumped up charges of sedition were necessary so that Pilate would ultimately condemn Jesus to death while freeing Barabbas, a known thief and murderer, was set free.
- Carrying a cross, the instrument of His execution, Jesus was led to the place of the skull, known as Mount Calvary, just outside the city gates. Having been beaten and abused by the Roman guards, Jesus stumbled down the narrow streets leading out of the city. Simon of Cyrene had to help Him carry His cross. Nailed to that cross, Jesus lingered for six long hours, dying around 3:00 pm in the afternoon.
- Only the women who had made the journey with Him to Jerusalem and one of His disciples, John, were with Jesus to the end. Then taking His body down from the cross, a secret follower of Christ, Joseph of Arimathea, offered a grave site, an unused tomb near the place of execution. Hurrying to place His body in that tomb before the beginning of the Sabbath, a large stone was rolled across its entrance.
- Saturday, the day of sabbath rest, was a nightmare for the followers of Jesus. All of the hopes and dreams that had accompanied them on their journey to Jerusalem as well as the events of the past week had come to nothing. Both Jesus and His kingdom had died on that cross. There was

nothing left to do but to go and anoint His body with the spices and herbs of a traditional Jewish burial when the sabbath was over.

- Early on Sunday morning, the first day of the week, several of the women went to the tomb. They came prepared to anoint Jesus' body, one last way of expressing their love and devotion. Still overcome with grief they had forgotten that the tomb was sealed. How would they gain entrance? They were, therefore, surprised when they saw that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. Entering cautiously they encountered a young man dressed in a white robe sitting in the very place where they had placed Jesus' body. Sensing their fear, the young man said to them, "Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen." Amazed and startled all at the same time, the women fled from the tomb, a tomb that was now empty.

What took place on that resurrection morn was far beyond what any of those who experienced it could ever have imagined. It was simply beyond their ability to comprehend or understand until they were confronted with the unmistakable reality of what had taken place. A dead man had been placed in a tomb that was now empty. Their discovery and that which transpired among Jesus' followers can be described by three words—unexpected, unbelievable, and finally undeniable.

For the women as well as for Jesus's disciples, the stone-cold truth of death had closed their minds to everything that He had told them during their journey to Jerusalem. On more than one occasion Jesus had said that He would be arrested when they arrived in Jerusalem, put to death on a cross and that on the third day He would be raised from the dead. Putting His lifeless body in that grave erased all of those memories. In fact, they were so filled with grief that it erased almost everything from their consciousness. All of the things that Jesus had said, all of the miracles that He had performed were now nothing more than distant memories fading into obscurity. Anointing His lifeless body and saying goodbye for the last time to all that He had meant to them was their final act of devotion. Meeting what appeared to be an angelic messenger and hearing and seeing what he told them was completely unexpected, beyond everything they believed would take place on that Sunday morning.

Breathlessly running back into Jerusalem and telling the disciples what they had seen and heard produced another reaction. What the women reported

was simply unbelievable. A man who had experienced the kind of physical abuse that had been heaped upon Jesus, beaten to within an inch of His life and then nailed to a cross where He lingered for six long hours, did not return from the realm of the dead. Luke tells us in the 24th chapter of his gospel that when the women reported what had happened, the disciples refused to believe them. They thought the women were just overcome with emotion. The empty tomb was just idle speculation. Nevertheless, Peter decided to go and see for himself if what they were saying was true. Arriving at the gravesite, he stepped inside and sure enough the tomb was empty. Only the grave clothes remained. Amazed and confused, he could not comprehend what had taken place. Perhaps someone had come and stolen the body. The possibility that Jesus had been raised from the dead was still unbelievable.

All of those doubts and fears, however, began to recede in the hours and days that followed. What had been unexpected, then unbelievable, became an undeniable reality. There was that unexpected appearance of Jesus to two of Jesus' followers on the road to Emmaus. Then it was reported that Jesus had appeared to Simon Peter. Later the risen Christ met with all of His disciples, even sharing a meal with them. For forty days He continued to visit with them, sometimes showing up in the most unusual of places, like a fishing trip on the Sea of Galilee. Years later Paul writing to the Christians in Corinth said, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of who are still living, though some have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:3-6).

Now what does all of this mean for us on this twentieth day of April in 2025? The events of the last week of Jesus' life, leading up to the discovery of the empty tomb on Sunday morning, really did change the course of human history. Christ's resurrection opened the door to the expectation that we too can experience a life beyond the grave. Jesus Christ and He alone is the One who can save us and usher us into His heavenly kingdom. The empty tomb is a reality that cannot be denied. It was a discovery that was unexpected, almost unbelievable, but one which became ultimately undeniable. As Christians have boldly proclaimed down through the centuries, "Christ the Lord is risen today, hallelujah."