

Easter Sunrise - Tucson
The Empty Tomb
John 20:1-9

HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA!

Our text for this morning's message is John 20:1-9 which is printed on page 4 of your worship folder.

¹ *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"*

³ *So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)*

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus our Crucified and Risen Savior and Lord,

I don't know if you've ever realized this, but there was a lot of running on that first Easter morning so long ago. The Gospel of Matthew tells us the women "*hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*" (Matthew 28:8 NIV). In Mark 16:8 we are told the women ran out of fear, "*Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.*" We read in John's account of Easter morning that Mary Magdalene, "*came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple . . .*" (John 20:2 NIV). The inspired writer Luke tells us that Peter, "*got up and ran to the tomb.*" (Luke 24:12 NIV). And the Apostle John completes the account by telling us that he, also, ran to the tomb with Peter (John 20:3-4). We're going to run to the empty tomb this morning, too, figuratively speaking, because the empty tomb is our special focus today.

If you are so inclined, you can do a lot of running here in the greater Tucson area. In just the next month you can participate in the Catalina State Park Trail Run, the Student Health Advocacy Committee's Run For Your Life, the Sabino Canyon Sunset Run, and the Sahuarita Nut Run (1 of 3 runs in the "Orchard Series" which takes runners thru the pecan orchards).

I'm going to guess that nobody here ran to church this morning for the Easter Service. You probably came by car or truck. You don't really feel the need to run to church this morning because you and I gather together realizing that the Easter tomb is the same today as it has been every other year, the Easter tomb is empty. That is the special focus of this service, the empty tomb. It is easy to have a finely-tuned focus on a day like today. But what about the rest of the year? Sometimes we forget to

focus on the empty tomb. Sometimes we get caught up in all of the things of this life so that this finely-tuned, focused joy of Easter is forgotten for the moment or even snatched away from us by the turmoil of this life. Sometimes we forget to run to the tomb of Christ. But Jesus reminds us to keep our focus on his empty tomb.

I. Jesus' tomb is empty

Did you notice in our text this morning how intent the followers of Jesus were? They had been there on Good Friday, and had seen Jesus breathe his last. They were there to take Jesus' body down from the cross and hastily prepare it so that he might be placed in his tomb before the Sabbath began. Now, it is Easter Sunday. ¹ *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.* She couldn't wait until it was light, but went while it was still dark arriving at the tomb as it was becoming light. Mary was loyal to Jesus. She was there on Calvary and saw him die. She witnessed Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus place the body in a tomb and roll a large stone over the opening. Now Mary hurried to the tomb to finish the process of properly preparing Jesus' body.

What did she discover? Mary went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. In the Gospel account of Mark that was a concern of the women. As they went to that tomb they wondered aloud who would roll away that large stone that was in front of the tomb. As you may also remember, the enemies of Jesus went to Pilate and said, "We need to make that tomb secure because his followers might come and steal the body out of that grave." So they put an official Roman seal on the heavy stone that had been rolled in front of the tomb, and posted a guard. But when Mary arrived at the tomb, the seal was broken and the stone had been rolled away.

² *So Mary came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved.* (That would be John, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee.) Mary came running to Simon Peter and John, and said, "*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!*" Mary had come with spices. She had come to prepare that body. It was a shock to her that Jesus' body was not there. The tomb was empty. Even though the angel told them what happened, it was still hard for her and the women to comprehend that Jesus had risen. They could only assume that his body was stolen. It wasn't there so someone must have taken him.

Jesus' tomb was empty. Jesus' followers had expected to find something there. They expected the tomb would be sealed up. They worried that the guards might send them away. But the guards were gone and the tomb was empty. So they ran back to Simon Peter to tell him the news. ³ *So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.* They started out for the tomb of Jesus to see for themselves whether it was empty. They needed to know if what the women said was true. ⁴ *Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.* You can almost picture Peter and John running as fast as they can to reach the tomb. When John got there, ⁵ *He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.* John arrived first, but he was still in shock. He thought twice about going in, and paused, but still he saw the linen grave cloths lying there. ⁶ *Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb.* John stayed outside but Simon Peter, always the impetuous one, Peter rushed in. When Peter rushed into the tomb, he, too, saw the pieces of the linen grave cloths lying there, ⁷ *as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.* Peter took note of the fact that the pieces of linen were there, but there was no body. The run to the Easter tomb found something that just didn't make sense –

no dead body -- the tomb of Jesus was empty. For them there was sadness and heartache and more emptiness. That was then.

But today and over the years, Christians have understood and celebrated the focus on Easter that the tomb is empty. For us it does not give us an emptiness or sadness or sorrow, but instead gives us joy and rejoicing. The empty tomb means for us that Christ is arisen and lives, and because he lives after death, so also will we. The resurrection of Jesus wasn't a story that someone concocted. No one stole the body. Even though the Roman guards were encouraged to spread the rumor that someone had taken the body of Jesus, it was not true. Instead Jesus came back to life to give us life and immortality. God didn't merely revive Jesus, that was not God's intention. God resurrected Jesus. There's a difference between the two. Reviving Jesus would simply be cheating death for a short period of time. Resurrecting Jesus would be defeating death, once and for all time. 2 Timothy 1:9-10, *"This grace...has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."*

As believers, we gain confidence, assurance and peace when we run to Jesus' empty Easter tomb. The empty tomb reminds us of God's grace to us. You and I who deserve to be punished in hell forever because of our sins, instead are forgiven. The empty tomb is the finely-tuned focus of our attention each Easter. The empty tomb is proof that the death of Jesus was sufficient to pay for the sins of the world. The empty tomb reminds us that Jesus has done everything needed for our salvation. We get the benefits of Jesus' life, death and resurrection through faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Yes, many in this world are going to lose this fine-tuned focus and purpose of Easter Sunday by tomorrow, or maybe by this afternoon. But you and I and believers throughout the world realize that this empty Easter tomb begins to give focus to our run through this life. This is a finely-tuned focus we need to concentrate on even more because of the simple fact that the world around us grows ever darker with sin, unbelief, the rejection of Christ and a hatred for Christianity. We run to the Easter tomb and find that the tomb is empty. No sadness, but joy! "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:54 NIV). No matter when your last day on this earth occurs, your mortality will be clothed with immortality and the perishable you will be clothed with imperishable.

As believers in Christ, the eternal victory is ours, not only on the last day or on the day of death, but today, because we run to the Easter tomb and this tomb of Jesus is empty. The reassurance we also have is that Scripture is fulfilled.

II. Scripture is fulfilled

As you read the Gospel accounts of the death and burial of Jesus, you can almost feel the sadness and the hopelessness of Jesus' followers. You can almost feel the sense of doom and gloom that covers them like a cold, wet blanket. From Good Friday until Easter Sunday they mourned and grieved. Jesus' followers came with only one purpose on that first Easter Sunday morning, to finish preparing the body to remain in its final resting place and then roll the tomb shut on the dead body of Jesus. Now that the body wasn't there, they could only think of one thing, that a despicable deed, an unspeakable crime had been committed. Someone had stolen that body. The disciples ran to the tomb to see if such a thing could really happen.

⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Peter looked over the tomb quite closely. He saw those pieces of linen, but no body. He saw the burial cloth that had been placed over Jesus face. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Peter began to think. This wasn't a grave robbery. Tomb raiders would have taken the body, the linens and everything else with it. They would not stop to leave the linen cloths lying there. Thieves wouldn't have stopped to fold up the burial cloth from his face and put it aside. The strips of cloth would have been taken or the cloths would have been in a heap, in a pile.

⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. Peter and John begin to understand that the body had not been stolen. Instead, Christ was alive. He had risen. The exit from the tomb had been peaceful. The exit from the tomb was a miracle. The exit from the tomb was an example of God's divine, great power. The exit from the tomb was the fulfillment of all the promises of God. But as a side note, verse 9 tells us: ⁹ *(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)* It still was too close to that death. They were still steeped in sadness. With tears of sorrow, they still did not quite grasp it that, for centuries, Scripture had said that all these things would happen. They knew that the body had not been stolen and that it had come back to life, but it was still hard for them to comprehend that full meaning of Scripture.

Today, we have the privilege of looking back over hundreds of years, thousands of years, and understanding how all of Scripture fits together perfectly. It's like an assembled puzzle that gives us the complete picture. But even back at the time of Christ, if the people had paid attention, the death and resurrection of the Messiah was long foretold and foretold in detail. For instance, in Psalm 16, which was often sung in the synagogue services, the worshipers sang about the empty tomb. Psalm 16:9-10, *"Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay."* Jesus the Savior was put to death on Good Friday, and his body did not see decay. Jesus was brought back to life, out of the tomb, by early Easter Sunday. He was not abandoned to the grave. Scripture was fulfilled.

In the 53rd chapter of the prophet Isaiah there is specific prophecy about Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Isaiah describes the fact that Jesus was to be rejected by men and the fact that our punishment was placed on Him. In verse 11 of chapter 53, Isaiah writes, *"After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities."* These words were written as prophecy hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. It is one of many instances in which prophecy about the Messiah was fulfilled in Jesus. The Lord Jesus came back to life and saw the light of life. By believing in Jesus as the Light of life Christians participate in his victory over sin, death and the devil. We run to the tomb understanding the tomb is empty, because Scripture is fulfilled.

Tomorrow begins another week. By tomorrow many of us will run back to our callings in life or run back to the obligations we have for family or friends. Sometimes in that running around, we forget about the run to the empty tomb. Sometimes that joy is lost. For many life is not a FUN RUN, it's become a RAT RACE. The Lord reminds us as we are racing and running around in this life to also concentrate and think about that run to the empty tomb. The tomb of Jesus is empty not because anyone stole the body, but because Christ came back to life. It is empty as Scripture foretold would happen. Then the joy in our

run through life is that we know that our future is certain, safe and secure because the tomb is empty. The joy that we know is the joy we can share.

You and I get to proclaim the Gospel of God's grace that Jesus who lived in heaven, came and lived here on earth and died and rose again so that we would live with him forever. Therefore in your daily run in the race of life remember to run to the Easter tomb. The empty tomb tells us Scripture is fulfilled, death is defeated, and we are heirs of eternal life. Amen.