

**Sermon File #1133**

**Scripture Text: Matthew 28:1-10**

**Sermon Title: *The Open Tomb***

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**Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.**

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## ***The Open Tomb***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to Matthew 28:1-10, as we on this Easter morning look together at Matthew's account of Jesus' resurrection, the climax of the gospel message and "the central event of Christian history and New Testament theology" (Blomberg, 425). The four Gospels have different accounts of Jesus' resurrection, which shows us that their reports of this stupendous event were not a collaborative effort to deceive (Wilkins, 934). While not contradictory to each other, these accounts give us the unique perspective of each evangelist. The number and exact identity of all of the women involved in various visits to tomb is indefinite, but it is clear that God used them in a unique way as witnesses of this most crucial event for the Christian faith.

The crucifixion and death of Jesus provided the necessary sacrifice and atonement for the sin of the world; yet, without his resurrection, which Jesus promised but the disciples had never understood beforehand, Jesus' death would have made him a tragic figure, without the power to save us. But because Jesus rose again on the third day as he had promised, the cross has meaning and there is now hope and promise for the resurrection of all of us who believe in him.

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

Although The Church of the Holy Sepulcher (called The Church of the Resurrection by the Eastern Orthodox Church) is more likely the site of the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid, Nancy and I had a greater appreciation for the Garden Tomb, which General Gordon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century claimed to be the tomb where Jesus' body was buried (See Wikipedia site below). The Garden Tomb is outside the city walls (as the tomb beneath The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was before AD 44), and probably typifies the kind of cave-like tomb into which Joseph laid Jesus' body (Matthew 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" (Matthew 28:2). The radiant appearance of the angel frightened the guards at the tomb nearly to death.

The four Gospels tell us how God used women as the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, which is remarkable because in this first century Jewish and Roman culture, the witness of women was not considered credible. The Lord Jesus through the New Covenant not only exonerates women, but also elevates them to equality with men in kingdom life (Galatians 3:28). Here the women disciples appear much more courageous than the "macho" guards who are frozen stiff by the appearance of the angel.

On this Easter morning, I want us to look into our text and see the discovery of these women followers of Jesus of his open tomb and what it says to us about what the Lord Jesus would have each one of us to discover and to experience today. The open tomb, first of all...

### **Says "Come and see"**

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 resurrection body, what NT Wright calls a "transphysical body," one that is still tangibly physical, but also one that can transcend the limits of time and space (646). 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 simply appear with his disciples, passing through the barred door of the Upper Room, and ascending into the heavens (John 20:19ff, 27; 21:13, 15ff; Luke 24:13ff; 36ff; Acts 1:9).

God caused an earthquake, perhaps an aftershock from the earthquake following Jesus' death on the cross (27:51ff), and also an angel, to remove the stone entrance to give an "open house, an open tomb..."

*To seekers*

The stone was rolled away to make the tomb an open tomb for seekers.

One of the former favorite pastimes of my wife, Nancy, was to go to what is known in the US as “open houses,” where real estate sales men and women would invite potential buyers to come inside to look over the house, with all of its benefits. Nancy was rarely a serious seeker, but was usually simply curious and perhaps gained some ideas about how to decorate our own house. Realtors soon discovered we were not serious seekers for a new house.

The women who came to the tomb that early Sunday morning were indeed seriously seeking Jesus, although they were expecting to find his corpse. The light of the truth of Jesus’ promised resurrection hadn’t yet dawned upon them. These women sought Jesus “in the wrong way,” with incomplete knowledge; yet, they nevertheless sought Jesus and he blessed them and they were to discover the truth of the resurrection (Morgan, 319). Although their understanding was weak, their love for Jesus was strong, and they came prepared to anoint his body with the customary burial spices (Mark 16:1). They did not come to the open tomb of Jesus simply out of curiosity, like Nancy and I went to open houses. They were serious seekers.

I recall during a vacation week we spent in Nancy’s sister and brother-in-law’s home on the Gulf Coast of Florida. On a rainy, overcast day when the beach would not have been enjoyable, Nancy prevailed upon me to look at some open houses which were very exclusive and expensive. It was very obvious that we were not serious seekers to the real estate salesman when we drove up to this multi-million dollar house in our small rental car. As he opened the door to graciously invite us in, he asked sarcastically, “Did you bring your check book with you?” He knew by all appearances that we weren’t serious lookers, but took us on a tour of the palatial house nevertheless.

The tomb is open to all comers, and it’s important to note that the first to the tomb and thus to discover Jesus’ resurrection were these women and not those who were known as the more prominent disciples. Women in this culture were weak and powerless as far as political and religious structures and social expectations were concerned. The tomb is still open this Easter morning for those that Jesus says the Father will bless—the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for God’s righteousness (5:3-6).

The open tomb says “come and see,” which was spoken by the angel but was an invitation...

*From the self-revealing God*

God was pleased to make the glorious truth of the resurrection of his Son known to these women, and then later to more than 500 other disciples who received his teaching and commission during the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 15:1ff).

Most of us are familiar with the evidence God gives about the bodily resurrection of his Son. We have (1) the words of Jesus that he would rise, (2) the witness of the angels at the tomb, (3) the empty tomb itself, (4) the appearance of Jesus to believers, (5) the transformation of the disciples, (6) the reaction of the opposition, (7) the commission to mission, (8) the existence of the gospel itself, (9) the fact that it was unexpected by the disciples and they became convinced, and (10) the existence of the church in spite of Jesus' death on Good Friday (Augsburger, 327). We can add to this list the fact that the day of worship for the followers of Jesus shifted from Saturday Sabbath to Sunday, in honor of Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week (Sunday).

God revealed himself perfectly through his Son, who is called the living Word of God, who "has made him known" (John 1:1-18, esp.18). The message of the Scriptures focuses on the Lord Jesus Christ and the saving power of his death and resurrection. God's Word tells us that Jesus died as the perfect sacrifice to pay for our guilt for sin. And yet, without his resurrection, Jesus would be only a tragic figure, the victim of his own messianic delusions and of the cruel injustice of his executioners. As Paul eloquently states, if Christ is not raised, then our faith is futile and we are still in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17). The resurrection of Christ vindicated his unjust suffering and death and also demonstrates that God accepted the sacrifice of his Son for us.

And the resurrection of Jesus promises and proves our own bodily resurrection. Paul tightly and inextricably links the resurrection of Jesus with our own, saying that if our bodily resurrection isn't possible then Jesus was not raised; and if Jesus was not raised, we are still in our sins. Paul adds that 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, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). That means that without the resurrection all the promises of God would fall and we would be in the same condition of despair as the disciples, who after Jesus' crucifixion thought all was lost.

James Montgomery Boice tells the following story that those of us who live so near to the Waterloo Battlefield ought to know:

"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!”

Boice then makes the “striking parallel” that 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, 79f, quoted in Wilkins, 964).

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 in the Gospels and in all of Holy Scripture. And we have his truth in the indomitable and inexorable 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.

They had seen him and been with him and also, like the women at the tomb, knew this self-revealing God...

#### *Who gives the experience of faith*

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. I believe they experienced the reality of faith even before Jesus met them on their way. Faith comes by hearing, and as Paul says, “the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 8:17).

We are saved, not by sight but by grace received through faith, which comes through the word and by the Spirit. And Peter says that “Though you have not seen him (Jesus Christ), you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8f).

When we respond by faith and trust to the word of God, his grace then enables us to see, to understand. As is often said, we do not 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 will 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 do not understand in order to believe. Rather, we believe in order to understand. When we accept God’s word and act with obedience, turning from sin and following Jesus as the risen Lord, we are given a mind and heart to believe and to understand. At the moment of surrender to Christ we are given to understand. We say, “Ah hah! Now I see!”

This self-revealing God is the one who gives us this life-changing experience of faith...

### *And who receives our worship*

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, clasping his feet in worship (9). The word used for worship here is simply to prostrate oneself before, to give homage and honor to one who is worthy. When we realize the worthiness of the risen Lord Jesus, our response should also be to fall before him, to worship and adore him, the Almighty Co-Creator and the one who loved us and gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20).

Worship begins with the recognition of the presence of Christ and his absolute worthiness. Worship is placing ourselves before him and centering our lives in him and before him. Worship is giving him all that is due him, including our very lives. And when we worship we allow him to make our lives an expression of continuing worship, as a living sacrifice to him (Romans 12:1). Worship is the attitude of gratitude that Jesus died for us and is the attitude of joy that he is risen from the dead and lives with us and through the Spirit lives within us (Colossians 1:27).

It's interesting that Jesus came to these women in an ordinary place and spoke to them in an ordinary way. Worship is not something that takes place only corporately at a set time on Sunday morning, but is a way of life, whereby Jesus comes to us in the ordinariness of life and makes the ordinary extraordinary by his transforming, encouraging and sometimes disturbing presence.

Twice in our text the women had to be told to not be afraid, by the angel and again by the risen Lord (5, 10). The Lord Jesus wants to love us and also to assure us of his gentleness and kindness. But also, when we are aware of the holy presence of Jesus we cannot be "matter of fact" and casual. That's why I think in some of our corporate worship and music we could use a little more emphasis on the holiness and otherness of God and of the risen Christ. And when we see his awesome glory, he immediately tells us we need not be afraid, because he who created as well as calmed the seas, is also the one who loves us and longs for us to feel the joy of his companionship and the kind embrace of his love.

When we worship the risen Lord Jesus, he turns our 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." Jesus defeated your enemy. Jesus defeats whatever threatens you today and whatever causes you to fear, because *he lives*.

The open tomb says "come and see," but also it...

### **Says "Go and tell"**

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. 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. We who claim to be followers of Christ have experienced the forgiveness of our sins and the transforming power of a relationship with the risen Christ. But this experience is not to remain inside the “tomb” of our private experience but is to be shared.

On this Easter Sunday we need to be reminded of...

*Our commission from Jesus*

The angel had a message from God to the women, which was reiterated by the risen Lord: “Go quickly and tell the disciples” that Jesus is risen and wants to meet with them (7&10). Just as for these women, so it is true for us: our experience with Jesus is not something we keep to ourselves nor is it primarily for ourselves that Jesus has made himself known to us.

Our experience of conversion and our continuing relationship with Jesus is certainly emotional. I wonder about the validity of a relationship with Christ and a salvation experience that are bereft of the emotions we see in these women—a sense of awe and wonder and hearts that thrill with joy. But these emotions are vitally and essentially connected with obedience. Knowing Jesus results in a transformed life of holiness and active obedience.

Jesus and the apostolic writers of the New Testament all underscore the truth that assurance of personal salvation results in personal character transformation, characterized primarily by holiness, love for God and others, and obedient service to Christ and his kingdom (Matthew 5:15-23; 22:34-40; 25:31-46; John 15:9-17; 21:15-17; Romans 12:1-2; 13:8-14; 1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:16-25; James 2:14-26; 2 Peter 1:3-11; 1 John 1:5-2:17; 3:11-15; 4:7-21, etc!).

Sin is primarily disobedience, not just in our acts of rebellion, but also in our failure to follow the will of God (James 4:17). To follow Jesus means when live by the love of Jesus, which is Godlike compassion and action in behalf of others, living by the Great Commandment, loving God and loving others as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). We sin when we fail to become actively involved in meeting the practical needs of others and when we delay doing what we know God is calling us to do. Mere talk, warm emotions and good intentions are not enough. By themselves they add up to simple disobedience.

Notice that through the angel the Lord told the women to “go quickly and tell the disciples” this amazing news (7). To delay would have been unthinkable disobedient. Once you know what God would have you to do, to linger and delay is to disobey. Jesus never said to follow him tomorrow or whenever it becomes convenient or after you fulfill your personal plans. He isn't pleased when we “sacrifice” our leftover times, plans or resources. He demands first place. We acknowledge him as worthy of first place or our worship is a sham and pure hypocrisy.

Our commission is...

To take the message...

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! The message is about the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. And God has revealed to us as clearly, as to these women eye-witnesses, that the crucified Savior is now the risen Son. No other religion in the world has such a message, that our Lord was crucified and is now alive.

Paul determined to make the center of his proclamation Jesus the crucified, risen Savior:

“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

God has revealed to us that the crucified is now the risen, living and reigning Lord Jesus, who has defeated through his death the power of Satan, sin, death and hell, and that victory was sealed and is given to us as an everlasting sign through his resurrection.

The authenticity of the resurrection accounts in the four gospels is accentuated by the obvious absence of any effort at collaboration. Also, had accounts of a resurrection been fabricated, the gospel writers most certainly would not have chosen women to be the witnesses. In this particular culture, women were considered at best risky witnesses and at worst a liability (Green, 313).

God continues to choose the most unlikely to be his followers and witnesses (1 Corinthians 1:18ff). 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 be excitedly convinced 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. He requires only your brokenness and your faithful walk with and dependence upon him.

One of the most convincing evidences of the historicity of the risen Lord Jesus is the amazing transformation in the lives of the disciples, from fearful, fickle followers and deniers of Jesus, to indomitable, joyful witnesses who couldn't help but speak about Christ, whatever the cost to them personally. They were so absolutely convinced that Jesus lives that they were willing to suffer and die horrible deaths and even considered martyrdom a privilege (Acts 4:20; 5:41f; 2 Timothy 4:6ff).

And likewise, the most convincing thing about your witness for Jesus will be the change he is making in your life and your joyful and ready witness for him, whatever the cost to you personally.

We have good news that we are privileged to take...

## To restored followers

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). Remember, these disciples had forsaken him and their leader, Simon Peter, had denied him despite Jesus' warnings (26:31-35; 69-75). But Jesus called them his brothers, despite their sins and failures.

The message of the risen Christ is one of grace—his willingness and even his eagerness to forgive all who come to him, turning from sin and the failures of the past and accepting his atoning sacrifice on the cross and the victory of his resurrection. The risen Lord Jesus paid the full price for us, and as he was paying that price he prayed for our forgiveness (Luke 23:34). Thus he welcomes home his disciples as brothers, as forgiven prodigals (Turner, 682).

You may think that because of some shameful failure in the past you are disqualified as a witness. But the example of the disciples tells us that all Jesus wants is our brokenness and he will 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 has 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

### *Our joyful going with Jesus*

We have the incredible privilege, not just of serving Jesus, but of going with Jesus, of joining him as he continues to make himself known in saving power. As he said in his commission to the church, “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (20). We don't go *for* Jesus, we go *with* him and he is always *with us*. And as we go we worship him. We love him and we enjoy his love for us, and life and service become an act of worship (Romans 12:1).

When Mary wanted to hold on to the risen Lord Jesus he said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them...” (John 20:17). Jesus introduced a new way for us to hold to him, by clinging to his spiritual presence while at the same time going forth in his name to join him in his kingdom work.

I like the way that Early Church Father, John Chrysostom (347-407), said it. We can take hold, not just of his feet, but also his hands and sacred head and embrace Jesus in this life and “even more fully on that day when (we) see him coming with unspeakable glory” (309).

On this Easter Sunday, I pray the Holy Spirit will revive our joyful assurance of the presence of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, in whose presence is the fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). That joy is found as we love and serve him through loving and serving others. In the faces of his children we see his face and in the hands of others we touch his hands and as we serve, wash the feet of his needy people we wash the feet of Jesus (John 13:12ff). I pray that you and I will discover the joy we find in the Jesus who is in those we love and serve.

## **Conclusion:**

Today have you come to the open tomb and seen that Jesus lives? Has the fog lifted just as the stone of unbelief and fear has been rolled away? Have you come and seen?

We have heard the complete message because now the fog has lifted and the tomb is open: Jesus defeated Satan, death and hell. Christus Victor is our Savior! If there is 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 will see that the tomb is open. The stone has been rolled away in order for you to see the risen Savior, Jesus. You need to hear this good news of the risen Lord Jesus, who will change your life and the lives of those around you.

And there are people around you who, like the English in June of 1815, are awaiting some good news. All they are hearing is "Wellington defeated...." They read and watch the news, hoping for good news about the economy. Or they hear reports from their doctor, their children's school teachers, or their employer and it sounds like "Hope for your children or your marriage defeated, hope for your financial security or your good health, defeated." They need to hear the full story, how that Jesus defeated Satan and because he lives he is victor. So, we need on this Easter morning to come and see and then go and tell.

For those of us who have failed him, Jesus has a word of forgiveness for us and he even calls us his brothers and his sisters. When we turn to him, he is faithful to forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Remember, Jesus defeated our sins and our failures so that we might have his righteousness and a love relationship with him.

The tomb is open for us to go in to believe and to worship and to come out to love, serve and obey him as our spiritual service of worship (Romans 12:1). Now that we have come and seen the risen Lord and are experiencing his goodness and grace, it's time for us to go and tell about the one we love and serve.

The tomb is open, the fog is lifted. The crucified and risen Jesus defeated Satan, sin, death and hell.

## **Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. Try to imagine the thoughts and emotions of the women as they approached the tomb of Jesus.

2. What is the difference between someone's seriously seeking to know Jesus and simply those who have a superficial curiosity? What makes the difference?
3. Think about the statement, "We do not understand in order to believe, but we believe in order to understand." Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. What do these women teach us about the impulse and nature of worship (9)?
5. What is the connection between worship of Jesus and obedience to him?
6. What is the significance of Jesus' reference to the disciples as his brothers (10)?
7. What is the connection between our worship of the risen Lord and our obedience to his Great Commission (9, 19)?

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