



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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March 23, 2008  
Easter Festival  
John 20:1-8  
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Jonah 2:2-9  
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 118  
Second Lesson: Colossians 3:1-4  
Gospel: Matthew 28:1-10

### To and From the Tomb

We have gathered together this morning to, I suppose you would say, in spirit go to a cemetery, to go to a grave. But we go to a grave that's unlike any other that you ever have visited. We go to a grave that is empty. And Christians throughout the world on this day figuratively go to that grave that is empty.

It seems kind of odd, doesn't it, to go to a grave that's empty? When we go to a cemetery, we go there because someone we love is buried there in the ground, right? In fact, for this reason, because Christians have always done this, I've been told that there are those around the world that mock Christians and that their great prophet has a grave and they know where it is but we Christians have nothing. That's exactly the point, isn't it? As we come to this grave this morning, there is nothing. The grave is empty. Christ rose and that resurrection makes all the difference in the world. This "nothing" changes our lives. You can see it this morning in those words that I just read to you. You can see what the people are like when they come to the empty tomb, and you can see what they are like when they leave the empty tomb. And the Lord brings that same change to our hearts today also.

There are three people that we are going to look at this morning—Mary, Peter and John. On that first day they went to the tomb. As they went to the tomb, the women might have been carrying things for preparing Jesus' body for proper burial because they had to do it so quickly on Friday before the Sabbath. But they actually were carrying a lot of other things with them, weren't they? Mary Magdalene comes there—Mary Magdalene has been the subject of many rumors and all kinds of weird and goofy stuff that you can watch on the history channel and in various novels that people write, things that we don't know for certain. What we do know for certain is that Mary Magdalene is one of the women that followed Jesus and helped support his ministry. We do know that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her which changed her life. So because of that, she followed Jesus around. Now, as she comes there that morning, she comes there, not with a skip in her step, not with a nice new outfit or bonnet, but her feet plod along one after the other as she forces herself to go to a place that for her is filled with grief and sorrow. The One who had changed her life, who had delivered her, who had healed her, cast out those demons, was now dead and buried and she had seen it. She had even followed to the tomb to know where it was because her devotion to him didn't stop when he died. She still was going to do something, whatever she could for this man who had done so much for her. Her friend, the One she believed was her Savior but who was now dead and in the tomb, she was filled with grief and sorrow, but her devotion remained. So she went there.

Then she gets there and just when she thinks things can't get any worse, to her mind and her eyes it appears things just got worse. The body is gone. It's not there. Someone stole it. They took it. They hid it. What is going on? She runs back now filled with grief to tell the disciples that something is wrong here. The grief and sorrow hid her eyes from what was truly there. So she came to that tomb with grief and sorrow.

What about you and me? We don't come today with grief and sorrow. We come here I suppose with excitement. But as you celebrate a holiday, if you've lost a loved one, is there still a sense of loss, a sense of sorrow, a sense of grief? Do you carry that with you through the various holiday seasons? Do you come here today still hurting because someone you love is gone? Does it seem like our dreams have been destroyed and our hopes dashed? Sometimes, even though we might know better, it seems as though the joy has been sucked right out of our lives also. Maybe we come today to this empty grave like Mary did, filled with grief, filled with sorrow.

After she had told those two disciples through her tears what she believed had happened—that the body was stolen—Peter and John take off and they start running. Evidently John is a little faster. He gets there first, but he doesn't go in. Peter does. As Peter ran out there, what do you think he carried with him?

Remember Peter?—the guy that always loved to talk, the guy who had looked Jesus in the eye and said "I'll die rather than fall away from you. I don't care what those guys do. I'll never forsake you." As he ran to the tomb, do you think he could still hear the rooster crow echoing his denials of Jesus? Do you think he could still remember how Jesus had once healed his mother-in-law and he wasn't there to comfort Jesus' mother as she went through this. He was off at a distance. Do you think the One that enabled him to walk on water, he would use those same feet to run away from him? Do you think he brought some of that guilt, some of that shame to the cross? His boasts in himself had become something that had led to all kinds of trouble. Here was big, strong, brave Peter crushed by the question of a servant girl around a fire so that he called down curses on himself. As he ran to the tomb, I have to think that this day was as hard on him as it was on anyone because he had that guilt. He had that disappointed look of Jesus probably still burned in his mind's eyes on the night that he had failed his Lord. So he comes to the tomb carrying with him a lot of baggage.

What about us? Do we carry around guilt and shame? As you sit here this morning, do you reflect on various aspects of your life and how you look pretty good in the eyes of the people around you but you know your hidden faults, you know the sins that you are caught up in that you want no one else in the world to know about. Maybe you are troubled by your failings as a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, an employer, an employee. Maybe you failed your spouse. Maybe you are dealing with the guilt and shame of your sins. Maybe you come this morning and it's the first time you've been in to worship the God that you have professed undying love for at your confirmation in many a week. Maybe you are afraid some people will say "What are they doing here? They don't come all that often. Why are they only coming on Easter?" Maybe we come with a guilt and a shame that we don't always want to admit, but maybe as we come here this morning, we are looking in the rearview mirror and looking back at Good

Friday and seeing that cross and being reminded not that it's where our sins were taken away, but maybe Satan is there telling us again and again "You're sins did this." Maybe we are struggling with the baggage of guilt and shame.

What about John? Did he come with grief and sorrow? I'm sure he was described as the disciple that Jesus loved—I would imagine he had grief and sorrow. Did he come with guilt and shame? He also had run away, but he probably could have soothed his conscience with, "At least I was there to comfort his mother and have Jesus say to me, 'Here is your son. Here is your mother.'" But do you notice how John gets to the tomb and he just stands there at the doorway and he just looks in. He doesn't go in right away. He seems to have this guarded skepticism. Could it really have happened? Could he really have risen? Was his body stolen? What in the world is going on? He seems to be afraid to look in and find out what it could be because he is skeptical.

Do you come this morning with some skepticism in your heart? How do I know the grave was really empty? All I'm relying on is some words that someone wrote almost 2000 years ago. Maybe some of these novelists are right? Maybe someone hid his body. Maybe someone stole his body. Maybe he was in a coma. How do I know this for certain? And how do I know it does anything for me?

Satan is going to bring some skeptical questions into our hearts at times, but the thing that we have to see this morning is like John and like Mary and like Peter, it's not as important how we come to the tomb. It's much more important how we leave the tomb. What we take away from seeing an empty tomb and what it means for us and the power that is there in the empty tomb. John went in. He finally went in and he saw the folded clothes. He saw the burial clothes laying there. We are told he saw and believed. The skepticism is gone. God worked in his heart to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. He wasn't just a popular religious leader. He wasn't just a great example, but he was the Savior of the world. A few verses later, in the same chapter, John writes in his gospel, "These words are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

God's Spirit chases away our skepticism because he leads us to stop doubting and to believe, to believe that our sins were paid for, the sins of our doubts, the sins of our questions, the sins of the things that we think we know better than God—they are forgiven through Christ's perfect life and through his death.

The life-changing power of the empty tomb doesn't stop there. Peter, guilt and shame, the guy who went outside and wept bitterly after he denied Jesus—Jesus used that empty tomb to comfort Peter. We are told in Mark that he told the women to specifically say, "Go and tell my disciples and Peter to go ahead of you into Galilee." Jesus reached out to Peter in his guilt and shame and took Peter by the hand through the message that was sent to him. Later on, Jesus personally would say, "Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs." He would reinstate Peter and assure him that he was forgiven.

The empty tomb does the same for us. Paul writes, "Jesus was put to death for our sins." That's what we saw on Good Friday. "But he was raised to life for our justification"—a word that means for our being declared "not guilty." When we look into

the tomb with the eyes of faith and we see that it's empty, this assures us that all of our sins have been paid for. That guilt and shame isn't something we have to carry. Whether we have failed God in whatever role we have as a spouse, a parent, a child, whatever the case may be, whether we have failed God by not keeping the vows we made at our confirmation as faithfully as we could, our God loves us and takes those sins away. That's what moves us today, tomorrow and going forward to work harder at being a better spouse, parent, whatever it might be, and to have the Lord be a part of our life through his Word and through his Sacraments because our God loved us so much that he died for us and he rose again so there would be no uncertainty.

This is a message that changes our lives. It's what leads us to put so much gusto into our Alleluias this morning and into our songs of praise. It's what moves our musicians to play with all their heart. It's what moves us to sing with all our heart. It makes us want to celebrate, right?

Isn't that exactly what happened to Mary? The tears that were watering the ground as she sat there changed when the guy that she thought was the gardener said to her, "Mary." And then she looked up and said, "Teacher." The tears still came, but now they were tears of joy—tears of joy that moved her to run back to where the disciples were and with joy in her heart say, "I have seen the Lord! He is alive! Death couldn't hold him!"

Think of what that means for you and me. As we face grief and sorrow, and we will on this side of heaven, we have God's promise that those who die in the Lord are with the Lord. We have God's promise that when we die, we who believe in Jesus will be with the Lord. That's our strength. That's our confidence. And that's what we celebrate!

So as you leave the empty tomb this morning, through God's Spirit, the gospel changes you. It assures you of some incredibly great truths and it touches your life forever!