

Sermon: An Empty Tomb Changes Everything

Year C, Easter

[Isaiah 65:17-25](#); [Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#); [Acts 10:34-43](#); [John 20:1-18](#)

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In my corporate career, before I was called to ministry, there was a meeting I was dreading. I had to ask one division to let us use some of their resources. And the head of my division had pretty much specialized in infuriating every other division in the company. (I know, you're all surprised that we've worked for the same guy). Right at the door of the meeting, my mentor handed me a pile of change and told me to borrow a quarter from the senior guy from the other side to get a Coke. I started to argue. My mentor just hissed at me, "Do it!" So I did. And it worked.

Now, we can talk about why it worked. There's probably a ton of social psychology behind it. I knew that the senior leadership was always feeding their egos and making life just about impossible for the people who have to actually get things done. But I hadn't realized how connecting with people over small things made the big things possible. Having learned that so early in my career, it changed everything.

We have all had those moments, big and small, that changed everything. The day your kid was born or the day they came home from Vietnam or Iraq or Afghanistan. The day she said, "Yes". The day you got your license. The day you first heard "it's cancer". The day you left your dad at the nursing home. The day you started drinking or the day you stopped.

Whatever that day was for you, you can point to it and say, "it changed everything." But if we were sitting together over a cup of coffee, you would probably tell me what led up to that moment. Because if it changed everything, you have to describe the direction you were going in before. And if we really push, really talk through some of that back story, we would probably find other moments where everything could have changed but it didn't. Maybe you weren't worried enough, maybe the boss hadn't been infuriating enough, maybe the Coke machine was broken. So everything stayed the same.

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of Mary Magdalene or Simon Peter and the other disciple. Up until that terrible Friday when Jesus was crucified, we would have said that we thought Jesus was going to change everything. Up until that terrible Friday, we thought Jesus was the Messiah, the one anointed by God to bring us into a holy and loving relationship with God. Up until that terrible Friday, we thought Jesus was going to make the world the way it had been described by the Prophet Isaiah, no more wars, no more children dying too young, safe homes with abundant feasts. Nothing hurt or destroyed on all God's holy mountain (Isaiah 65:25).

But on that terrible Friday, Jesus had been killed like a common criminal, with common criminals. He had died alone and in agony. The crowds who had shouted "Hosanna" when he had arrived in Jerusalem less than a week before had shouted "Crucify". He had been abandoned by the people who had followed him through thick and thin, who had seen with their own eyes the healing and restoration he offered everyone, regardless of who that person was. On that terrible Friday of Jesus' crucifixion, we had to face the reality that all the changes we thought were coming had been killed too.

After that terrible Friday, all through the following Saturday and into the pre-dawn of that Sunday morning, the one thing Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter and the other disciple were sure of was that nothing had changed.

Mary Magdalene set out that morning to do right by Jesus, to make sure that the rituals that showed respect for the dead were completed. She found the tomb empty, so she went and got the other disciples. They too saw the empty tomb. Simon Peter saw the cloths. It says the other disciple believed, but doesn't say what it was that he believed. It does say that neither one of them understood what they were seeing. And Mary Magdalene stayed outside and wept. But I don't think any of them were really surprised.

The authorities had been determined to make an example of Jesus. The authorities had wanted to be clear that turning talk of loving your neighbor into action was unacceptable. The rich and powerful were in charge and they were going to stay in charge. No one should be foolish enough to take any actions because they believed that the poor and the meek were going to live in peace and joy on God's holy mountain. Especially if the emperor wasn't going to get his cut.

So no wonder that Simon Peter and the other disciple went home. They knew what the empty tomb meant. It meant that those in power had regretted letting Jesus' body be buried where it could be treated with respect. They were worried about the people who loved Jesus rallying together because they could be near Jesus. It makes sense. You can see how those disciples thought that an empty tomb meant that nothing had changed.

What *is* surprising is that Mary Magdalene didn't go home with them. She was determined to do right by Jesus. She had to know that she was taking a risk, because anyone who took public actions to show their support for Jesus was an enemy of the state. The authorities had not been moderate in their response up to that point. But she went anyway. Once the tomb was empty and the body was gone, the only sensible thing to do was to go home with the other two disciples. Anything else, especially looking for his body, could be seen as provoking the authorities to respond.

But she told the figures in the tomb she was looking for her Lord (John 20:13). To be absolutely clear, the only one who was allowed to use the title *Lord* in her world is the Roman Emperor. Mary knows the gardener had to have overheard her, because he's right there behind her when she turns around. She certainly doesn't walk back she said or hide what she intends to do. She says flat out, "If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." (John 20:15) If the gardener moved the body, he did so under orders, probably right from the top. Mary Magdalene is saying, essentially, not only is she about to commit treason against the most powerful empire the world had ever known, but she was inviting this total stranger to join her in doing so. Someone whom she has reason to believe is already working for authorities.

She was standing outside the tomb, weeping. When I said that we all have moments when everything changed, some of you had to think of when you lost someone you loved, a parent, a spouse, a child. You were sad, of course you were. But for many of you there was also anger or frustration. You wanted what the Isaiah described. You wanted a hundred years and more together (Isaiah 65:20), you wanted lives with as many days as a tree (Isaiah 65:22). You wanted not to labor in vain, nor to bear children for calamity (Isaiah 65:23). You wanted life on God's holy mountain (Isaiah 65:25). If someone asked you why you were weeping, sorrow was part of it, but so was frustration at all that had been lost.

Less than a week before, Mary Magdalene had thought her life and her world were headed for God's holy mountain. Now, she can't even show respect for a dead body. By killing Jesus, the powerful have taken away her future. By taking away his body, they were denying her the right to follow her people's traditions. The powerful have taken away her past as well. Of course she's weeping, in sorrow and in fury.

But maybe she doesn't care about what the authorities think of her anymore. She's beyond being sensible and assessing the risks. Or maybe she's being the most sensible she's ever been. If her future and her past are gone, maybe it's time to make the call, to take her stand. It's time for her to decide how her beliefs in Jesus' teaching and preaching are going to drive her actions. For her, that empty tomb changed everything.

If the guy she thought was a gardener was really a gardener, then her call and her stand might well have led to death at the hand of the authorities. We would never have known her name, never recognized ourselves in her.

The reality was that the gardener turned out to be Jesus risen from the dead. Mary recognizes Jesus, calls out to him "Rabbouni", meaning teacher (John 20:16).

The empty tomb changes everything. It's that moment when we begin to understand scripture, in the way that Simon Peter and the other disciple did not (John 20:9). God is reaching into the flow of human history and changing its course. Jesus knows our names even when we do not recognize him. Jesus calls our names to bring us back to his teaching. Jesus is there, alive, so we know that death itself will die. Jesus will ascend, not just his Father but our Father, not just his God but our God. Jesus is simply the first. Jesus goes there ahead of us. This world with all its brutality and oppression is not all that there is.

Our faith in Christ tells us all those things. We can hear those lessons, we can believe them. But when we see an empty tomb, will it move us into action? Simon Peter and the other disciple weren't quite ready. Their faith didn't *quite* tip them into action. Later, they would found the Christian church in Jerusalem, they would take the hard actions that allowed the beliefs of those who followed Jesus to travel from Jerusalem to Antioch to Rome to Germany to England and then on to New England and New Hampshire. They founded communities of Christians because it takes practice to understand the teachings of Jesus Christ. It takes others to help us see how to turn what we believe into action. It takes other people to tell us to ask for quarters and still others to lend them to us. We need each other both to believe and to move into action.

Because we will all have a morning outside an empty tomb. A morning when everything changes or everything remains the same. Will our sorrow and anger and faith drive us into action? We will make the call? Will we take a stand? Will we be able to say, "An empty tomb changes everything."