

Far More Than an Empty Tomb

John 11:17-27

*But these (signs) are written **so that** you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.*

John 20:31

Introduction: Most this morning can affirm the fact that we love this day, the focus on the joy of the resurrection, the colors, music, family gatherings, and of course, the candy. It feels so much of what we love about spring, as the weather begins to warm up, plants begin to bloom, and the Simi Hills have not yet turned brown. In fact you are most likely here today because someone invited you, be it a family member, co-worker, or friend, and you are looking forward to the interaction after this service. But this morning I want to challenge our thinking about Easter in two specific ways, and then look at a key passage explaining both of these themes.

First, we can get so familiarized with a story that we can easily miss the point. Like watching your favorite movie for a 10th time, often it loses the awe and wonder that it held the first time. We can get caught up in the story of the resurrection, the empty tomb, the angel rolling the stone away, the soldiers becoming like dead men and lying, the women who saw the empty tomb and ran, and easily miss the point of the power and purpose Jesus displayed in all of this. This morning we want to come to grips with the Person of the resurrection, not simply the event itself, since He is the point.

Second, we want to think about Easter personally, not generally. Easter is made powerful because of Good Friday, where Jesus brought new life through His death, and did so for individuals like you and me. We were contemplating how quickly life goes by the other day as Easter in our family is marked by new dresses, pictures, and dinner at the Coopers (our family away from family). Our oldest is now 12, which means these days of egg hunts and simplicity are quickly going to fade out them moving out, away, and on with life. Life goes by quickly, and death is thus inevitable in the end. It marks and unites all of us, and is a reality we all must face. This morning we are going to start at a **funeral**, a time when Jesus not only displayed His power over death, but also paved the way for His death and resurrection. In the midst of this story, we find one of the clearest declarations of saving faith that we have in the gospels, from one of the most unlikely of sources, a hurting, frustrated, but faith driven woman named Martha. Jesus asked her the question that frankly we must all answer this morning: ***Do you believe this? Do you believe that Jesus is who He says He is?*** This will either be answered in the positive or negative this morning (and a non-answer IS an answer), and the results will be eternal.

A Funeral Pointed to Something Greater (17-19)

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off,¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.

Setting of a funeral

Let's go back a few months in the life of Jesus before the Sunday when He left the tomb. John 10:30 and 38 tell us that Jesus declared that He and the Father (God) were One, claiming both unity and equality with God, which prompted the religious leaders of the day to pick up stones and try to kill and/or arrest Him. Jesus moved His disciples to other side of the Jordan River, which meant He was safely out of the judicial reach of those who wanted to capture Him. It also meant that the risk was extreme if He went

anywhere near Jerusalem. Which begs the question: how would He get back on Palm Sunday and operate a whole week without getting arrested? The answer is found in what happened at a funeral.

Jesus received word that his friend and one that he loved named Lazarus was sick and on the edge of death. He lived in a small town called Bethany, which was just less than 2 miles away from Jerusalem. He was so concerned about His friend that HE WAITED 2 more days before heading to see him, knowing full well that he would be dead by the time He got there. When He told His disciples the plan, that they would see their friend Lazarus even though He had died, one of the honest disciples named Thomas voiced what the rest were thinking, "**Let us also go that we may die with Him.**" (John 11:16) They thought, 'this is the last ride into glory, so let's go out in a blaze'. But Jesus had other intentions.

It was at the funeral that Jesus performed one of His most profound miracles. He called His friend out of the grave and to everyone's amazement, the one they came to mourn and honor walked out of the tomb. It'd be equivalent to showing up for a friend's funeral only to have him shake your hand and thank you for coming as you were leaving. Besides being a loving act, what was the point of this miracle?

Purpose of the miracle

Confirmed who Jesus was: Jesus performed many miracles during His public ministry: He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, cast out demons, and calmed storms. This showed His compassion on those who experienced brokenness because of a broken and sinful world, but more than that showed His power and authority over this world. This world was created by Him, through Him, and for Him (Colossians 1:16). When He displayed the power of divinity He was leaving little doubt that He was categorically different than any other person who claimed to be Messiah (and there were many). John summed up the purpose of His miracles in **John 20:30-31**, "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but **these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.***" Jesus is, was, and forever will be different since His is the ONE AND ONLY Messiah, the only one who is the way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).

Signaled what He was about to do: Now He was going to do something **undeniable**, it was going to be public, and **no one could dispute it**. This is why Jesus waited 2 days to go. By the time He got to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead **4 days** (John 11:17), which not only meant he was good and dead, but Jewish thought taught that a person's spirit hovers over his body for 3 days, but by the fourth day they realize there was no going back. Jewish custom and culture did not embalm their dead, but would simply wrap them, put spices on the body (some essential oils for sure), and place them in a cave or another place to wait for the body to decompose, then would gather the bones in a box called an ossuary and put them in a family tomb. Even Martha thought there would be a stench if the stone was rolled away from the cave opening (11:39) since even spices could not negate death's smell. This miracle would be a forerunner for what was going to happen in a few weeks time, where Jesus would leave a tomb Himself, since death could not contain Him.

Created a buzz of intrigue to all the mourners present: There were perhaps 100's of people that saw this miracle, and they became a group that went back into Jerusalem telling the tale ("no really, we were there and saw it with our own eyes!"). This explains two key things: 1) How did so many gather on Palm Sunday when Jesus returned? They wanted to see this Lazarus that had been raised from the dead (John 12:9), and 2) they created a buzz around Jerusalem that was so excited to see Jesus, there was no

way that the authorities could arrest Jesus. This is how Jesus could enter back into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday without immediately getting arrested again.

Signed His death warrant: This miracle in particular exposed the fear and intentions of the religious leaders of Jesus day. They wanted to be in control, and Jesus threatened their place and control of the nation (John 11:48). If there was an opponent who the people loved and could raise people from the dead, they could and would easily be displaced. So they did what so many do when their control is threatened: they made plans to put Jesus to death (John 11:53). This is what Jesus offers to the willing and threatens to the unwilling: **He will give us life, but calls us to lay down ours. Those who do NOT want to yield control over their own life will view Jesus as a threat, not a loving Savior. How do you view Him?**

Now lived as a fugitive: From the time of Lazarus' resurrection to Palm Sunday Jesus was a fugitive (11:54). **Why is this all so important? Because NO ONE took Jesus' life from Him, but as a good Shepherd, He laid His own life down for His own** (John 10:18). He did miracles, but also exercised strategy in moving to the cross as exactly the right time as a Passover Lamb, the One who could take away the sin of the world (John 1:29)

A General Understanding Pointed to Something Specific (20-24)

So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

Knowing the players involved

Coming back to this small town of Bethany, we re-introduced to two women, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus and a family Jesus interacted with often and whom Jesus loved. These are the same we saw in **Luke 10:38-42**, where Mary is seen as the contemplative, quiet, thoughtful learner at Jesus feet. She listened more than she spoke. Hearing Jesus was more important than action, being in the moment more important than doing. Martha, on the other hand, was a woman of action. When Jesus was in her house, she played the hostess with the mostest, stressed and anxious to make sure everyone had enough to eat, were comfortable, and the house was presentable. She was a doer, a mover, one who did not sit still. In her zeal, she lost her place and called Jesus out, "Tell my sister to get off her duff and help me!" Jesus, in patient and clear response, said "Martha, Martha (the double name is rarely a good thing), you are anxious and distracted, and Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her." We see Martha is active again as Jesus approached her house, she sped outside to meet Him, and she was ready to have another conversation, while Mary stayed quiet in mourning in the house.

A General faith – general hope

Notice that her first statement to Jesus was NOT angry but frustrated and sad, "Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died, since I know that whatever you ask from God He will give you." She had experienced Jesus' teaching and miracles in the past, and she believed He could have healed her precious brother while he was fading from life. Note that she was not referring to raising Lazarus from the dead, since she was the one who reacted negatively to the rolling of the stone away later in the story (John 11:39). Jesus' response was simple: "your brother will rise again". This was true and fit even the Jewish teaching of the time, that there would be a general resurrection of the dead in the future.

Martha took this as comforting since she knew it was true, but was missing something. She took this as we so often do at funerals when someone says, "At least you'll see your loved one someday". It is a general comfort to a general hope. **But there was something missing, as there often is when we do not have something specific to hold onto in death.** Most of here this morning believe that if there is something after we die, it will be good or neutral, but not bad. The future does not fill us with hope so we cling hard to this life, and any loss physically is hard to bear. That is where Martha's mind was. She was thinking **temporally, physically, and personally.** Perhaps that how you view Jesus today. He is there to help you in your physical life, to make it better, to create ease, to give comfort. The next statements Jesus made not only changed Martha's life, it can change ours as well.

A Personal Faith Pointed to True Eternal Life (25-27)

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,"²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

Divine explanation and question

There are **three powerful, earth shattering statements that Jesus made before He asked the question we must all grapple with this morning:**

Resurrection is found in a Person, not just an event: Instead of focusing on her brother, Jesus pointed her back to Himself. The story of Easter is NOT SIMPLY A NARRATIVE of an empty tomb, although it absolutely demonstrated that death could not hold Him. No, the story of Easter is the story of JESUS, that He not only was going to resurrect, but that He actually IS the resurrection, embodying both resurrection from the dead and life itself. **This is where hope is found. This is hope for the present and the future, not simply that we will see loved ones again, but that we get Jesus.** It is IN HIM that we have hope in death and life.

Physical Death Comes to us all - The reality that He told Martha? We will all die. Death is a consequence of sin entering the world in Genesis 3, and we have all felt the effects since then. We die because we are sinful. And because we are ALL born into sin (Rom. 3:23), we all deserve death (Rom. 6:23). Jesus did not come to prolong our life in this world, but to redeem us for the next.

Physical Death is Not the End - This is why Jesus said that everyone who believes in Him will never die. What Jesus revealed was that our life here and now is real and important, but not the end. He came so that we could have life in His name. This life is both eternal and NOW. He said it this way: **And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.**" (John 17:3). Eternal life does not start when we die, it starts now and extends into eternity. This means that real life is found in Jesus alone, and apart from Him is not only physical death, but eternal death.

True reality staring us each in the face this morning: not that we all will die, but apart from Jesus we will face eternal death and God's wrath for our sin. This is what we all must come to grips with.

Jesus ended this explanation with the simple words: **Do you believe this?** Understand that this type of belief was not simply a mental ascent to the facts, but entrusting oneself to them. In other words, it is not just coming to grips with Jesus on an intellectual level (I can get my mind around Jesus, sure), but actually banking your life on it. Its one thing to believe a parachute will open intellectually, its another thing to jump out of the plane. Jesus was asking if Martha trusted Him to step out of the plane.

Saving profession

Martha's response was one of the clearest, most definitive, and hopeful responses to Jesus during His life on earth (only Peter's in John 6:68-69 is on par). Belief in Jesus as Savior is a gift from God alone, so when we come to this conclusion, it means He has gifted us with faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Her short **3 phrase explained the whole of the gospel.**

You are the Christ - She believed Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one, the One who would save His people from their sin. He did this by becoming sin (2 Cor. 5:21) so that we could have life. He bore the wrath of God on Himself, as God found satisfaction for sin by Jesus substituting Himself for us on the cross. As a substitute, He was righteous where we failed, and also gives us His righteousness so we could have a relationship with God and follow Him in obedience.

You are the Son of God - Jesus was not a created being or a great leader, He was God Himself (John 10:28-30, 38). Only God could save us from God. Jesus is the Faithful and just who can forgive us from our sin (1 John 1:9) because He took our place (1 John 2:2-3). Jesus lived a perfect life, fulfilling the entirety of the Law, and though He never committed any sin, was hung on a cross through unrighteous men. It was on the cross that God treated Jesus like He should have treated us, so that through His life He can accept us through the righteousness of Jesus.

You have been sent into the world - The plan of salvation, or resurrection and life, was not a reaction to sin or somehow the Plan B of creation, but it was God's perfect plan all along. He loved us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) and moved heaven and earth to buy us out of our sin. Jesus was the just and justifier (Rom.3:26), the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2). It was the plan of the Godhead to have Jesus come, to live, to die, to raise again from the dead and offer eternal life IN HIM. When we believe, ask for forgiveness, and entrust ourselves to Christ, we repent of our sin and follow Him with all of our life, both now and into eternity. This is what Martha believed, and in believing, she had life.

So here is the point of this morning, this day, and all of life. Do you believe? What do you believe? Notice that Martha did not know everything about the Bible or about the future, but she believed what Jesus said about Himself. Notice that she did not have to add anything to this belief, but simply focused on Jesus. When we follow Jesus, other things inevitably follow, but don't save. Only Jesus saves, and we cannot add anything to His work, but He requires all of us. Today can be a day of salvation, of forgiveness of sin, of embracing life for the first time. Do you believe? Do you believe Jesus is God, divine, who took your place on the cross, who conquered sin and death, and who now is our Lord and Master to follow and serve? If that is true of you this morning, God has revealed it to you, and calls you to follow Him with your whole life. **"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** (1 John 1:9). We'd love to talk with you afterward and help you understand and move forward in your relationship with Jesus Christ the Lord.

Easter is much more than just an empty tomb. It is about Jesus, the resurrection and life. We embrace Him today as our greatest joy and enjoy life in His name.