

## "The Stone Is Rolled Away!"

It was dark as they arose that Sunday morning... The two got up and put on their garments, grabbed their spices and headed out on the dirt road that led out of the city. As they headed out on the road and as the sun began to rise the path was lined with many dark shadows... but no shadow or darkness could compare with the darkness that hovered over their souls.

As they walked up the path towards the tomb, memories of the sights of the last week -- ripped through their minds like violent tornados. They had been there when Jesus rode in on the colt before thousands shouting his praises, what an incredible moment that was. The memories of the events of last week didn't stop there. Try as they might they couldn't stop those other thoughts, those terrible scenes from playing out again and again in their minds.

They saw Jesus tied to a post a Roman scourge filled with broken pieces of pottery, glass and bones ripping across His back. As they recalled the purple robe -- the beatings, the cruel mocking and the crown of thorns, the tears began to flow again. They had seen it all -- they had seen Jesus, their teacher, their friend, their Lord go through the agony of whips and cruel mockings and even the nails and spear piercing his hands, feet and side. Those women were there at the cross. They saw Jesus hanging there on that rough cross of wood... they saw His body struggle and wince with pain with every breathe that he took. They heard Jesus cry out, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me" -- and they saw his head fall as he cried, "it is finished."

They were there when Jesus died, and when he died a part of them died too. Their hopes and joy died on that cross with Jesus, on that dark Friday nearly 2,000 years ago.. Their Lord was dead... And their hope was gone.

So what are they doing up so early on this Sunday morning? Why aren't they lying in bed wallowing in their misery... What was it that drove them from their beds before dawn, and put them on this shadowy climb? All we can propose is that their love for and devotion to Jesus drove them to prepare the body for a proper burial since there had been no time before because of the Passover Sabbath. And besides no one else had volunteered--just these 2 faithful followers, 2 women who were at the side of Jesus until the very end as they thought.

The task they were going to perform was a somber task, a difficult task... They would be the ones, who would wipe the blood from the brow, from the legs, from the sides, They would be the ones, to clean the blood soaked body, remove the blood that had matted in his beard, They would be the last ones, to touch his face. Suddenly a problem -- something they hadn't thought of until now, entered their minds and they said to each other, "Mary who is going to remove the stone -- how can we get inside to Jesus if the stone is in the way?"

"And suddenly there was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who is crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples and Peter: 'he has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him' now I have told you."

Maybe you have never asked, "why was the stoned rolled away?" and "for whom was the stoned rolled away?" Was it rolled away for Jesus? No, he was already gone. It was rolled away for these women, so they could see that the tomb was empty. That's the

significant thing isn't it—the empty tomb? What does an empty tomb mean for them and for us.

The obvious answer is, the empty tomb means that Jesus is alive!! The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of Christianity Paul put it this way "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins..."

That explains why from that very day there have been efforts to dispute and attempts to attack the truth of the empty tomb. Many theories have been proposed over the years as to why the tomb is empty, all of which are weak and far-fetched. And each one requires that the disciples be part of a grand conspiracy in which they promoted and preached a lie.

Charles Colson, the Nixon adviser who was convicted as a conspirator in the Watergate scandal, writes that the Watergate cover up convinced him that Jesus was raised from the dead. He said, "There were only 8 or 10 of us around the president who really knew what was going on. All we had to do was stonewall for a couple of months and the Watergate scandal would be over. We had all the power and prestige of the presidency at our fingertips. And if the truth broke there would be embarrassment and perhaps a prison sentence. There was no grave danger. Our lives were not threatened, but even then we could not hold the conspiracy together for more than 2 weeks. We could not contain the lie. Once prosecution was possible the natural instincts of self-preservation were so overwhelming that the conspirators one by one deserted their leaders. We caved in and stood in line at the prosecutors office to take a plea bargain and escape jail."

Colson concludes, "I know that the disciples could not perpetuate a lie like the resurrection, because it was not just their reputations that were at stake, their lives were in danger. They had no clout, they had nothing to gain by the lie and yet every one of them stood fast in the conviction that Jesus is alive. Take it from one who saw first hand how vulnerable a cover up is: nothing less than a witness as awesome as the resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive and he is Lord!" And as a result every one of the apostles died a horrible death save John.

Today if we will look at the evidence, the case for the resurrection is overwhelming: The Christian Church has survived through persecution after persecution. Worship moved from Saturday to Sunday the day of the resurrection. Calendars bear the mark of the Christ as we still refer to BC and AD. There are the eye witness testimonies of the Resurrection by more than 500. And then there is the inability of anyone in the first century to produce the body of Jesus, which would have quenched the fire of this movement. It's even attested to in the testimony of non-Christian writers in the first century. Even Roman law was affected as soon after the resurrection it became illegal to remove the contents of graves when previously it hadn't even been a concern of the authorities. The evidence is massive that Jesus Christ is Alive!

Matthew goes on to say, "so the women hurried away from the tomb afraid, yet filled with joy and ran to tell the disciples." So Mary and Mary hurried to tell the others the great news of hope. Can you even imagine, what it would be like to be the first ones to ever tell the news that Jesus is Alive!

The empty tomb means that there is forgiveness. Even for the distraught, guilt ridden, sin weary fishermen named Peter. Peter also went to the tomb that morning. Without hesitation he went in to see for himself. When Peter walked inside, he saw the strips of linen and the burial clothes that had been around Jesus' head, folded, lying on the stone slab. Peter's heart was racing and tears of joy were flowing, "He's alive! Jesus is alive!!!" Later as Paul says, Peter met Jesus alive. The Bible doesn't give us any details -- of that meeting. It doesn't tell us what Peter said. I doubt Peter said much of anything.

Imagine Peter alone, sitting with his head down... Peter had set such high standards for himself, "even though everyone else may leave you Jesus, not me -- I'll never do that, you can count on me." He knew that he couldn't forgive himself, he couldn't believe that Jesus could forgive him either... He probably thought, "I don't deserve your forgiveness Jesus. While you were being beaten and crucified I denied you. I was only thinking of myself."

And maybe then Peter felt a hand on his shoulder-- and he looked at the hand and he saw the hole made by the nails. His heart stopped beating and as he turned to fall to his knees, He heard the voice of the one who loved him more than life itself say, "Peter, it's all right I forgive you."

The empty tomb means there is forgiveness, for God accepted Jesus' sacrifice and raised him back to life. Our sins are washed away. Jesus won the battle over death sin and the grave. And he gave us the good news of the forgiveness of sin.

The empty tomb also means that we have a new life in Christ now and in eternity. Jesus died to give us new life. When the apostles were in jail in Jerusalem --an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and told them, "Go stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life."

We are born again -- not under the law (which said you had to do something to be something) but under the grace of Christ. He has done it all and because he lives we too live. We are free from what Peter described as the empty way of life in which we once lived. Now we have a living hope -- the hope of the new life is living -- not like the hopes of this life that disappoint and die. The empty tomb means that there is hope! There is more than this life! In the midst of life's rain we know that the sun will shine again. We know that we are headed to a better place, a perfect home... no more pain, suffering, heartache, death, disease, an inheritance that will never: perish, spoil or fade and that is kept in heaven for us.

We are shielded by god's power -- he is on our side. And in this new life we can know that there is a reason behind the trials we suffer... "So that our faith may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." We live with an inexpressible joy -- a joy that words can't describe. because of Jesus' resurrection. And finally we have the salvation of our souls.

Maybe when you got up this morning, like the 2 Marys you were just going through the motions of living... Dark shadows marked your path, little passion and less hope. You don't have to go home the same way --- the stone is rolled away. The tomb is still empty, look inside, Jesus is not there. Jesus is alive and all that he said is true... We have eternal life, joy , peace that passes understanding and a living hope that will never fade or dim.

My dear friends, don't let another Easter come and go, without looking into the tomb, seeing Jesus, beholding the lamb, finding forgiveness and taking hold of the new life that Jesus has called us to live. Christ fought and won the battle over sin death and Satan to give you hope and life... He died for you and he rose for you too.