

Some of the most impressive structures on earth are, or contain, tombs: The Taj Mahal; the pyramids of Egypt; Westminster Abbey—that’s just getting started. But there is one tomb that overshadows any of these in importance—a tomb that ironically can no longer be located with absolute certainty—a tomb just outside of Jerusalem, owned by a wealthy man named Joseph of Arimathea. This tomb contained the body of Jesus of Nazareth on Friday, but it was empty on Sunday.

The other tombs, for all their tons of limestone, marble or granite, are silent testimonies to death and its power over people. When archeologists or grave robbers first opened the pyramids, they found the bodies of dead Pharaohs, but when the women came to anoint the body of Jesus, they found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty—because Jesus had triumphed over death!

“Empty” is usually a negative word. An optimist may view a cup as “half full” while a pessimist sees it as “half empty,” but when something is completely empty, what good is it? Your gas tank is on empty—not good. If someone calls you “empty-headed,” that’s not meant as a compliment. But on this Sunday, “Empty” is gloriously positive. Empty is everything! “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.” That “place” is empty now, because Jesus lives!

Listen again to the words of the angel: “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.” Indeed, before the fact, Jesus had said that he would be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise. Jesus had called his shot. The resurrection was God the Father’s seal of approval on Jesus’ mission of rescuing us—the price Jesus paid to cancel our debt was accepted—and now even our most extreme enemy—death itself—is defeated! The apostle Paul expressed it like this: “We believe that Jesus died and came back to life. We also believe that, through Jesus, God will bring back those who have died. They will come back with Jesus.” (1 Thess. 4: 14)

No one can think about their own death without some fear or anxiety—if the grave is, in fact, the end of everything. If it is simply the end, humanity is no better than the leaf of a tree that grows for a time and then shrivels, drops to the ground and dies.

The Gospel—the Good News—or maybe we really ought to call it the Great News—is that Jesus died *and came back to life*! The resurrection is genuine! History and archeology both support the emptiness of Jesus’ tomb that Sunday morning. The Jerusalem authorities had a missing body problem on their hands. There is no record of anyone, anywhere, in any source—friendly or hostile—reporting that the tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea was still occupied on the morning of the first Easter. What all the sources report is that it was empty.

And yet...the empty tomb alone is not enough for faith. The empty tomb is like the envelope without the letter. The empty tomb by itself could never have sparked the birth of the Church. It was Jesus Himself who filled that void with reappearances on numerous occasions.

About twenty years after the first Easter, the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and said: “Christ died to take away our sins as the Scriptures predicted. He was placed in a tomb. He was brought back to life on the third day as the Scriptures predicted. He appeared to Cephas (the Aramaic name for Peter). Next he appeared to the twelve apostles. Then he appeared to more than 500 believers at one time. (Most of these people are still living, but some have died.) Next he appeared to James. Then he appeared to all the apostles; last of all, he also appeared to me.”

Apart from all the eyewitnesses just named, consider this: Something changed these poor, doubting, hiding disciples into believers; and not just believers, but people so transformed that they would willingly risk death for their convictions. Something changed the day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday. Something was so persuasive that it caused enemies of Jesus to flip flop and become followers. It was nothing less than the truth that Jesus came back to life.

For thousands of years now, Jesus’ resurrection has stood as the very heart of this Great News. Martin Luther once wrote: “He who would preach the Gospel must go directly to the resurrection of Christ...for this is the chief part of our faith.”

The women of that first Easter morning saw them first—the empty tomb and the risen Lord—and their lives changed. History changed. But please notice: Twice in this account from Matthew, the women are told, “Do not be afraid”—once by an angel, and once by the Lord Jesus Himself. What a great summary of the blessing of Easter. Jesus is alive, so you can put away your fear. The grave is not the end of everything after all. Jesus’ resurrection changes the grave from a dead end into a doorway; it’s not an end; it’s an entrance into an unparalleled celebration. Not only does Jesus’ resurrection remodel the grave, but it also means that our own bodies will be remodeled. We confess this in our creeds: I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Just as Christ was raised physically from the dead, so our bodies will be; our souls will be rejoined to resurrected bodies in the life of the world to come. Completely whole. Totally restored. A perfectly tuned physical body is one of the promises of Easter.

And because Jesus lives, he can come to us. He comes to us here and now, in words that raise believers to new life; He comes to us in the caring words and actions of fellow Christians. And you realize what this means? Church buildings may be empty today, but The Church is filling the world. God’s risen people are filling the world, and wherever we are, a living Lord and Savior goes with us. Do not be afraid. He has risen, just as He said.