



Empty Tomb; Full Salvation

There have been lots of **signals of triumph throughout history**. Often times when facing despair in battle soldiers could look to see their general and his presence would encourage them that they had not yet lost the battle. Sometimes a flag signals triumph. When Fort McHenry was under attack during the War of 1812 one American was aboard a British ship and could not return to American soil. Instead he could only watch as the Fort was attacked. He desperately watched throughout the night to see if the American flag was still flying over Fort McHenry. He knew as long as it was there it signified an American triumph. He wrote a poem about it. Some of you can probably guess the title of that poem. He called it: "Defense of Fort McHenry." Okay, so maybe that title wasn't the best title. Later it was more aptly named the "Star Spangled Banner." About a hundred years later his poem became the national anthem -the sight of the flag flying was a significant reminder. It's a striking picture: a flag flying at sunrise meant victory. What signal of triumph do we all still have today? It's one that spans more than a country. It is something which signifies victory for the whole human race. It's not a general on his horse. And it's not a flag either. Instead it is a burial cloth laying in an empty tomb. It is the most significant indicator of victory in all of history. And it means full victory and salvation for you today. This Easter Sunday consider the first sight of that sign of victory. AN EMPTY TOMB MEANS FULL SALVATION.

The women who first saw this signal of victory weren't looking for it. Luke mentions three by name, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Joanna, and he notes there were other women as well. These women had recently seen what many consider as one of the biggest signals of defeat: death. Jesus had been killed on the cross. He died and his body was placed in a dark tomb and left there sealed inside by a large stone. They saw him laid in the tomb on Friday just before sundown. At sundown that the Sabbath rest began. So, they followed the command to cease all work. That included their business of finishing the funeral preparations for Jesus. His body received the initial spices and wrappings from the two men who placed him in the tomb. They watched as the tomb was shut, then they headed home for the night.

For these women, and **for all of Jesus' disciples that was a hard night**. The following day was no doubt just as agonizing. The Sabbath rest was spent without work. They were supposed to be meditating on Scripture that day. When the Sabbath ended at sundown on Saturday, they only had time to prepare the spices, it was now no use journeying in the dark to finish their work. They would wait until the first opportunity on Sunday.

These women knew **the earlier they started about their business the better**. So, Luke records that very early in the morning they set out. It was the first day of the week. Their reckoning of time is inclusive, meaning they included marking a day if an event occurred at any time within it. That meant it was what they called the third day after Jesus had died. They had waited long enough. They had to get to the tomb as soon as possible. Were Jesus' promises true? They couldn't consider that right now. All they knew was that they had a burial to finish. It didn't seem like any of his promises could be true. They were headed there with the assumption that all his promises had somehow failed. They were not filled with hope or joy but grief and pain. They had already ceased to search for any sign of victory. They had a job to finish and that was all that seemed to be on their mind. But things would change for them that morning and change for all humanity. They were about to see a symbol of victory.

When they arrived at the site of the tomb, **they found nothing as expected**. The stone which had covered the entrance had been removed. John records for us that at this point one of them ran off to tell the disciples. The other women looked and even entered into the tomb to figure out what was going on. They found no body. Luke records the initial reaction of these women. They were wondering about it. This word often means to be "at a loss" or "confused." They had no idea what had happened. We see from John's account that the initial thought some had was that somebody had stolen Jesus' body. What was going on? They were staring at history's greatest sign of victory but didn't even see the significance!

They didn't have to wonder for long. Suddenly two men appeared, angels actually, and the sight of them threw the women into a panic. They fell to the ground terrified. I'm sure that for most of us even just the thought of seeing some spiritual beings appear at a gravesite would make the hairs on your neck stand up. The clothes of these angels shone like lightning. But the angels didn't appear to create confusion, they were there to add some clarity. "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen."

God sends his angels at crucial times to carry news to his people. They spoke in the past to the prophets. One spoke at the announcement of Jesus' birth and they shouted together with the glory of the Lord the first Christmas night. They spoke here at the greatest announcement, his empty tomb. They would appear again at his ascension. And someday they will accompany Jesus when he returns. But these spiritual messengers don't often come to reveal something new. Instead you find them coming to reveal that what God has promised is now fulfilled. Their announcement at the tomb is not anything new. Jesus is risen. "Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee that he must be handed over to sinful men, crucified, and on the third day be raised again?" Jesus had told them this, more than once with great detail. "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him, and kill him. On the third day he will rise again." (Luke 18:31-33).

Then the women remembered his words. Suddenly this sign of victory began to make some sense!

Isn't it amazing that it took them this long? They had an entire day of rest which was supposed to be dedicated to meditating on the Scriptures. Yet it didn't occur to them during that entire day of reflection that Jesus had foretold all these things? Many of them had been life-long students of Scripture but still could not connect the pieces. Only after they had seen the empty tomb and been reminded did they understand the significance of this empty tomb.

And we can't just blame the women for their lack of understanding. When these women told the other disciples, they considered the women's words to be nonsense. They weren't just puzzled; they were totally left in dark thoughts and despair! Even when Peter and John ran to the tomb to see for themselves it didn't totally clear things up. Luke mentions that Peter went inside and saw the empty tomb and grave linen laying there. But Peter didn't run out in excitement or joy. He went out wondering and in amazement at what had happened. Before you can conclude that Peter's wonderment meant remembering all Jesus words, you need to consider John added: "They still didn't understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise..." The full significance of it all was lost on the women and the other disciples when they first knew of the empty tomb.

That happens to us, doesn't it? You can grow up hearing the promises of God. You can dedicate days for worship and attend Bible classes for years. But what happens when something unexpected comes along that distracts you? Maybe it's a surprise change in your plans or a tragic loss of some kind. What happens to your understanding of God's promises? If you don't hold to his Word and what he has said you have nothing but an empty tomb that leaves you wondering and puzzled. You interpret everything with gloom and despair and fail to see what you should see. Something is missing. Left to our own we remain blind to the victory sign and live as if all is lost. We fear death, wonder about God's plan, and fail to see what it all means.

But something **amazing happens when you are reminded about the words and promises of Jesus.** The empty tomb takes on a huge significance! That is especially true when you really need that reminder because you've been too distracted by sin, death, and loss. When you are distracted by loss, death, pain, or something insurmountable, that is just when you need to remember the words of Christ. When you feel your life is disrupted; when you feel like God has failed you; when you feel like nothing makes sense; you need to hear again these words: "He is not here. He is risen." The tomb is empty. "Just as he told you." Apply those words to today and you get an amazing truth: THE EMPTY TOMB MEANS FULL SALVATION.

There's a **clear message which comes with the empty tomb.** If you didn't know Jesus and his Word, you'd be puzzled at what had happened. But you do know him and his Word. So empty tomb means a lot! At home, I sometimes see a tube of toothpaste left on the counter with the tube squeezed from the top end and the lid left off. I could look at it puzzled, or I could say, "I know exactly what that means. Another night of victory: one of my kids has clean teeth." That's what the sign of the empty tomb is like. Because you know Jesus and what he does you know exactly what the sign of the empty tomb means!

When you **feel the weight and guilt of sin** and wonder, "Am I suffering right now because of my rebellion and my failures? Is my God punishing me for my sin?" Then look to the empty tomb. "It is finished" Jesus said on the cross. The payment for all your sins has been met. God will never punish you for your sins. Jesus took the price and paid it all. When you see the empty tomb, you know the forgiveness is real! Empty tomb; full salvation. When **you are feeling alone and abandoned**, you fail to remember his words and see his tomb. You're not really alone. You just aren't holding to the Words of Jesus, "I'm with you always." He said he would rise. He did. He said he would be with you always. He is! Empty tomb; full salvation! Sometimes maybe you are **afraid of trouble and feel overwhelmed.** You aren't really overwhelmed, you're just too distracted to remember and apply the words of Jesus. "Do not let your hearts be troubled..." and "In this world you will have many troubles, but take heart, I have overcome the world." How do we know he has overcome? Look at his tomb. It's empty. He conquered all his enemies. Empty tomb; full salvation. **Does death bring you fear?** Not even death could stop him. He promised not even death will separate us from him. We will live just as he does! Empty tomb; full salvation.

When you are **worried that God demands too much and you'll never measure up**, remember his words. "Come to me, and I will give you rest for your souls." And "peace be with you." You worry if God will get you through, he says words you ought never forget "Trust in God, trust also in me." Who invites us to take refuge and trust in him at all times? The one who promised he would suffer and die for us and promised he would rise again. Look no further than the empty tomb.

The women and the disciples didn't get to see Jesus right away. They didn't need to. Why? They saw his tomb was empty and that was an indication of a glorious truth. The third day had come. He rose and kept his word; he fulfilled the Scriptures to the very end. They had the words of Jesus and the words of the Scriptures. Those words declared "you will not abandon you anointed one to the grave, you will not let him see decay." And with him the promise that "all those who sleep in the dust will rise." He rose. That means that our rescue, our salvation is complete. It is fully done forever.

What does the empty tomb signify? The women were puzzled at the sight. But it was clear that Jesus had risen. Peter wondered at the empty tomb and the linen lying there -a clear signal that this was not the scene of some grave robbery. This was not the scene of some failure. This was the scene of salvation completely fulfilled in Jesus. We know what the empty tomb signifies. Jesus is alive. Salvation is complete. His empty tomb signifies what Scripture already declared.

Whenever you find yourself puzzled, wondering, or confused if God's plan of salvation for you is fulfilled in your life, **look to his sign of victory. Remember** the words of him who gave his life and who took it back up again from death. There's no flag signaling his victory, only an empty tomb and the burial cloth next to it. Remember what he told you and the significance of his empty tomb. He is not there. He is alive. His tomb is empty. You have full salvation.