

Born in a Tomb

sermon digest

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Luke 24:1-12

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Following World War II and the attempted Nazi extermination of Jews from Europe, the trials at Nuremberg were conducted to bring a measure of justice for the victims. A witness at Nuremberg survived the death camps by hiding in a grave in a Jewish cemetery in Wilna, Poland; and, while hiding, he wrote poetry. At the trials, he shared a poem about the birth of a child in the cemetery delivered by an eighty-year-old grave-digger. When the first cries of the newborn were heard, the old man prayed, "Great God, hast Thou finally sent the Messiah to us? For who else than the Messiah Himself can be born in a grave?" But the mother's emaciated body was incapable of producing milk for her child. After three days, the starving infant was seen drinking his mother's tears, and we are left to wonder, what became of this child? In telling the story, Paul Tillich (*The Shaking of the Foundations*, p. 164ff) concluded that this story surpassed anything the human imagination could have invented as he assumed, "probably he [the child] died and the hope of the old Jew was frustrated once more, as it had been frustrated innumerable times before."

The message of Easter begins in a tomb. The ancient tradition of the Easter Vigil has been revived in recent years. A precursor to the Easter Sunrise tradition, the Easter Vigil begins at midnight. The Paschal candle is carried by procession into the sanctuary of worship where the readings from the Old Testament recount the long human struggle with chaos and evil, the darkness which always seems to overwhelm every glimpse of light. In the early church Catechumens (candidates for baptism) waited through the night for the break of light and the act of baptism. Then, at dawn they were buried with Christ by baptism into death and raised to walk in newness of life.

Our Easter service has begun today at the height of the morning with the traditional proclamation, "Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!" punctuated with the glorious hymn, "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"; but our declaration of victory over death seems oblivious to the daily human struggle with the continued grip of death on life—the terrors of war, famine, political oppression, and continuing attempts at *genocide*, a word coined after Hitler's war to attempt to capture the depth of his hatred of Jews. If we dare to read the Gospels, we know that we are not here to cover the pain of grief and the reality of death with loud music and bright colors.

Christian hope was born in a tomb. The death of Jesus was far removed from the modern concept of *euthanasia*, a good death. He was crucified, the worst death the Romans could conceive, prohibited for Roman citizens, reserved for revolutionaries and the worst criminals. Typically the victims of crucifixion were left hanging on the cross as an example for the public until their remains were consumed either by animals or decomposition. On rare occasions, family and friends were allowed to claim the body for burial, as recorded in the Gospels.

Like the Vigil, the Easter message begins at midnight in the despair of death. Maybe John the Baptist was right in asking from prison whether Jesus was the Messiah or we should wait for another. The one John identified as "lamb of God" was denied the humane death of a Passover lamb. All mortals die, but what Jesus suffered was worse than death, a total humiliation to Jesus and devastating defeat for his disciples. The taunt at the cross contained an element of truth: he saved others, but he could not save himself.

As Sabbath approached on Friday evening, Joseph of Arimathea claimed the body of Jesus and placed him in a tomb. Luke identifies the women who had followed from Galilee as witnesses to the burial. At this point, it seems the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed was only words carried by the wind.

Carlyle Marney saw no expectation of a resurrection from the disciples of Jesus. Whatever Jesus had said about his death and resurrection had gone right over the heads of the disciples: "If they had expected resurrection, they would have been as we would have been, at the tomb's lip waiting for the first stirrings of that bound body, and they would have had Lazarus on their arm. . . . They just grieved and went on to live their shattered remnants."

Also, Luke provides no immediate antecedent for the pronoun, "they." Jesus died on Friday. His body was placed in a tomb for the Sabbath, on Saturday. At first glance, you might think that all of the disciples would have made the pilgrimage to the tomb on Sunday. But "they" does not include the men. Luke finally gets around to identifying "they" with the women who went to the tomb on Sunday morning—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of James, and others. The women visited the tomb for the specific purpose of honoring the body of Jesus. The perfumes, spices, and ointments were not for embalming, just to dignify the process of decomposition. It was an act of love and respect for the body. This is one of the

few points of total agreement in the four Gospels. The first witnesses of the missing body were women, the least respected witnesses in this patriarchal community.

When the women found that the stone had been moved from the tomb and the body of Jesus was missing, they were confused. They had come as friends in mourning, not in hope, not in expectation of good news. The women were taken by surprise. Two men in dazzling apparel (apparently angels) reported to the women that Jesus had risen; they reminded the women of his words in Galilee about death and resurrection. The total devastation of the disciples becomes apparent. You would expect a rush to tomb and a victory celebration at the report of the resurrection, but the Eleven did not believe the women. They concluded that the whole story was an "idle tale." According to Luke, only Peter was moved to see for himself. He was amazed at what he saw in the tomb, but not amazed enough to act. He simply returned home.

Easter dawns with the evidence of absence. Easter was born in a tomb. The first witnesses reported the absence of the body. The absence of the body is an argument from nothing. Our system of justice and the philosophy of science in our modern age seeks truth through evidence. We cannot imagine in this country someone being convicted for inability to prove absence from the time and location of the crime. Like modern science, our courts require evidence.

You may recall the banner headlines in 1989 that reported the discovery of cold fusion by Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann, one of the world's leading electro chemists. Cold fusion was the accomplishment of nuclear reaction at room temperature raising hope of an abundant source of renewable energy. The claim turned up empty when the process was tested and found to be a fraud. So again we were reminded that claims apart from evidence are useless.

We cannot escape the reports in the Gospels that the early claims of the risen Christ were greeted with skepticism and denial even by the disciples. Fifty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, Roman historian Tacitus registered in derogatory terms the source of the religion identified with Jesus Christ: "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out." The turning point which Tacitus could not understand was how this movement continued to gain strength in spite of the tomb.

The ancient Roman historian is not alone in his amazement at the continuation of the Jesus movement. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan are primary leaders in the Jesus Seminar famous, or infamous, for the critical analysis of the Gospels that has sometimes been characterized as disbelief or historical skepticism. In their book on Holy Week, *Last Week*, they note that the empty tomb, the evidence of absence, is the root of the Easter message. What we have in the Gospels is not testable evidence or even a report on the resurrection of Christ. What we have is nothing—an empty tomb, the absence of evidence. But they are not as skeptical as they may seem. Early Christians were no more in control of absolute proof of life after death, even in the case of Jesus, than we are. We can surmise that Jerusalem Christians knew the location of the tomb which they might have visited to see for themselves for years following Easter, but I doubt that an empty tomb would have been very convincing. Luke would be the first to tell you that an empty tomb does not prove or guarantee resurrection.

Yet, Borg and Crossan make the astounding statement: "Without Easter, we wouldn't know about Jesus. If his story had ended with crucifixion, he most likely would have been forgotten—another Jew crucified by the Roman Empire in a bloody century that witnessed thousands of such executions."

Have you been to the cemetery lately? When death comes to a family, the place of burial becomes the point of departure for our relationship. We ritualize the committal of the body to the earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; and we are expected by some well-meaning friends to walk away from the grave without looking back. But we find ourselves going back again and again and remembering the way it was and grieving over the finality of death. Don't think for a moment that your experience is any different from the disciples who observed the crucifixion. I dare say that every one of them believed, as you do, in the final resurrection of the dead, but the eschatology of hope did not rescue them from their grief. The later appearances and visions of the risen Christ opened the door to proclaim Christ around the world; but, just like we experience death, they had to live in physical separation from Jesus.

Gradually morning comes when hope revives, but it comes gradually by slow degrees. Some of us are in mourning for years before we can begin to live again. L. D. Johnson, Chaplain at Furman University, wrote *The Morning After Death* about the tragic death of his daughter at age twenty-three. The Sunday

after his loss, he preached a sermon, "How Christ Helps Us with the Problem of Death." He had to question his own faith: "Do I believe what I said about Christ and death in that sermon?' I asked myself from the bottom of the pit." Then he offered two words, "I do." Easter morning had dawned again. How strange, but how true, our discovery of the Christian hope is born in a tomb, by faith in the God who gives life even in the face of death.