

What must it have been like to see the empty tomb! To walk right down into the cold chamber where Jesus had been laid merely forty hours earlier, and to find no body! To have that shiver run up your spine, not from the early morning air, not from the cold stone of the grave, but from the fact although the body of Jesus had been wrapped and partially anointed, although the tomb had been sealed with a huge stone, and although Roman soldiers had been posted to guard it, the tomb that was full on Friday was empty on Sunday!

What would it do for your faith to walk into that tomb like Mary and Joanna and the other women, and find *nothing*. To see the linen cloths by themselves, like Peter did, no longer needed for the purpose of shrouding a dead body, for there was no body in that grave! How wonderful it would have been to be an eyewitness of these things! Who could fail to believe after seeing that?

Really? Is that how Luke presents those who experienced the empty tomb – as joyful and full of faith, encouraged and confident, delighted and hopeful? Look again at the words he uses: in v. 4, the women are *perplexed*, v. 5 they are *frightened*, v. 6 they are *forgetful*. In v. 11, the apostles are *dismissive* and *unbelieving*, and as one of the few who considered the women's report worth investigating, Peter is *astonished* and *marveling*, not because he knows what happened, but because he has *no idea* what happened.

The empty tomb does not create or strengthen the faith of the disciples. The tomb needs to be empty for anyone to have faith in the resurrection, but the empty tomb *by itself* merely confuses and astonishes. The empty tomb simply means that *something* amazing happened. It might be a monumental misunderstanding, as Mary suspects in John's account when she asks where the body has been moved to. It might be the greatest heist in the history of the world, as the rumor the guards are bribed to spread has it in Matthew. Or it might be exactly as the angel says in v. 6: the tomb is empty, and Jesus is not here, because He has risen, just as He said.

The empty tomb doesn't create faith; it creates doubt. Doubt in the minds of the people who considered Jesus to be worthy of death, and to belong in the grave. Doubt in the minds of those who think they understand the inevitable cycle of life and death. Doubt in the minds of those who see the Grim Reaper as an invincible conqueror. Doubt in the minds of those who think that death and the grave is the end of human existence.

It also creates doubt in the minds of those who think that there is no hope for them, that their sins must necessarily drag them down to death. It creates doubt in the minds of those who have given up on God, or who cannot accept both a world of suffering and a God of love. For all those who believe that the story of mankind and the story of their own lives ends in a cold, dark place of nothingness and despair, the empty tomb creates a holy doubt.

People who reject out of hand the possibility of resurrection cannot help but be troubled by the emptiness of the tomb. As the poet John Donne famously put it, "Death, be not proud". Nothing is as certain as death, right? But now the empty tomb causes us to look for certainty somewhere else.

And if this is you; if you don't believe or aren't sure that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, the empty tomb asks you this question: what did happen? Jesus said that He would rise again. What if that's exactly what took place?

And Christian, if you've ever longed and prayed for someone you love to put their faith in Jesus, how much would it mean for them to simply start to wonder, "What if it's true? What if the tomb is empty because Jesus rose from the dead?" What if they are just uncertain enough about their unbelief to be like Peter and start investigating for themselves?

This holy doubt is what enables the disciples to move from disbelief to wonder, and although *wonder* is not *faith*, it's dangerously close! Where unbelief slams the door, doubt cracks it back open, and then wonder slowly causes the door to swing wide, until God's Spirit imparts the faith that causes you to step through the door into belief.

And looking at this roller-coaster of different reactions, from confusion to fear to wonder, we see all over again that the disciples of Jesus were not credulous simpletons who would believe anything, as opposed to hard-headed skeptics and scientists who need proof and evidence before believing. Jesus' own disciples *do not believe the gospel* when it is first preached to them by women who received divine confirmation of the resurrection from the lips of angels!

Faith is something humans exercise, but it isn't something we create. It must be given to us first, before we can use it. This means that the followers of Jesus don't get any credit for their own salvation; if you believe in Jesus, it's not because you were wiser or smarter or better than anyone else! You are saved by faith, but that faith is not from yourself. It is the gift of God, not something you did, so that no one can boast that they saved themselves by being so good at faith.

The disciples didn't save themselves by faith. *Jesus* saves His faithless disciples by granting them the gift of faith. What they had was unbelief, fear, confusion, and at best wonder tinged with hope. But *wondering* at the story of Jesus, *marveling* over the strange events that surrounded him that you can't fully explain, this is not faith, and it does not save!

This is the tragedy of those who are "almost persuaded," like King Agrippa in Acts 26. You might be *intrigued* by Jesus, *impressed* by Jesus, *fascinated* by Jesus, but until you move from *wonder* to *faith*, Jesus is nothing more than a historical curiosity, and a historical curiosity cannot raise your soul from death to life.

So don't leave this as an open question! The most important thing in all your life is to *answer* the question raised by the empty tomb! This is the difference between life and death, *eternal* life and *eternal* death! The empty tomb might be temporarily fascinating, but unless it is *true* that Jesus rose from the dead, it is ultimately eternally irrelevant, and you are wasting your time. Don't stop until you find the answer: why was the tomb empty that day?

But if faith isn't something you can come to on your own, what is it that can move you from wonder to faith? What is it that can convince someone that although Jesus really died on the cross, He was raised to life on the third day? And beyond the facts themselves, what will convince someone that Jesus' death and resurrection means that sins can be forgiven and eternal life promised to all who put their faith in Jesus? Becoming a disciple of Jesus depends on certain facts being true, but a disciple isn't simply someone who believes facts about Jesus. The demons believe and tremble! How can you come not only to believe the truth about Jesus as the one who overcame death, but also come to put your trust in Jesus as the one who can save *you* from death?

Luke gives us the answer when he shows us how the women at the tomb went from being *perplexed* to *proclaiming the good news*. Look again at the angels' message: they pronounce in v. 6

that Jesus is not in the tomb because He has risen, and they *convince* the women by reminding them of Jesus' Word. Jesus had promised on several occasions that He would die and rise again, and when the women were reminded of His Word, they went and told the disciples what had happened. As Romans 10 says, faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

But a secondhand report wasn't enough for the disciples. They thought the women were telling stories, and they refused to believe, not because they were appropriately skeptical, but because they were *foolish* and *slow of heart*. It wasn't until later that day, when two of them went to Emmaus, that they had the Word of God explained to them in such a way that their hearts caught fire. Even then, it wasn't until the bread was broken and given to them by the hands of Jesus Himself that they moved from *hopeful wonder* to *true faith*. You can read about that in the next section of Luke 24.

We see from the text that what causes faith to be born in the hearts of the disciples is hearing, remembering, and being taught God's Word, followed by sharing a meal with Jesus. **Wonder becomes belief by means of an open Bible and broken bread.** This is why these things are right at the center of Christian worship: because this is what creates and sustains faith, which unites you to Jesus Christ so that you share in His sacrificial death and in His resurrection life.

Jesus suffered and died on the cross so that sinners might be forgiven, and He was raised to life so that all who put their faith in Him might share in His victory, so that one day we too will be raised from the dead when He comes again. *Hear and believe this good news!*

God speaks through the historical reality of the empty tomb, and He speaks through the proclamation of His Word so that the *meaning* of the empty tomb fills you not just with wonder and amazement, but with joyful faith that results in glad worship.

The angels declare the message of the empty tomb: Do not seek the dead among the living. Jesus is not here; He has risen! And so we His followers echo their voices as we proclaim: Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed.*

May God bless the preaching of His Word, and give faith to those who hear it.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Risen Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*