

THREE LOOKS AT THE EMPTY TOMB

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Our scripture this Easter is from John's gospel, chapter 20. As you read the gospels and their account of the Lord's life and of his resurrection you will find that they cover that story from many different camera angles, to us a modern analogy. In the reading from Matthew's gospel he uses a wide lens, a panoramic sweep. But here in John's gospel as John writes inspired of the Spirit he uses close up camera. Rather than giving us the full shot of the two women going to the tomb he does isolation action as with a camera in a sports field of showing one of the participants in close up profile. And it is that picture that we have before us in verses 1-9 of John 20.

"Early on the first day of the week while it was still dark, Mary of Magdalene went to the tomb and saw...." We might take a moment to underline that word "saw." It derives from the Greek word *blepo*. "Saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one that Jesus loved, and said, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him.' So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running but the other disciple outran Peter [that is John of course] and reached the tomb first. He bent over and saw [or looked in. There's the Greek word there. It is the word *blepo*] he saw in at the strips of linen lying there but himself did not go in. Then Simon Peter who was behind arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips [*theoreo*] of linen lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple [John] who reached the tomb first also went inside. He saw [then comes a third word in the Greek *horaō*] he saw and believed. They still did not understand from scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."

I want to talk to you today about three looks at the empty tomb.

The story is told of a king who in earlier times had three sons. The time had come for him to pass his kingdom on to one of his sons. He had of course been measuring their qualities of administration and leadership skill for all their lives. But on this final day he wanted to apply a test to make his ultimate decision. So he told the three boys that they were going to go on an archery hunt for a hawk. So they saddled up their mounts and took off.

Finally they came to a place where in the distance the king himself could see a beautiful hawk sitting on a tree branch about a third of the way down the tree in the far distance. He stopped his horse and his sons all stopped. He said the first son, I'd like you to look around and tell me what you see.

He said, "I see the blue sky I see the meadow, the rolling hill. I see some cows and over in the distance I see a tree." The father said to him, "Is that all that you see?" He looked again, "Yes father, I think that's about it."

To the second son he said, "And son what do you see?" He said, "I see the same thing that my brother saw. I see the blue sky and the grass and I see the cows and I see the tree. But I also see that about a third of the way up that tree is a hawk." The father said, "Is that all that you see?" He said, "Yes, that's all that I see."

He said to the third son, "What do you see?" he repeated. He too saw the blue sky and the rolling green, the cows, he tree, and the hawk. But he added this: "I see that beneath its beak

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that's where its heart rests there is beating on its chest. And that is where I am going to put the arrow." His father said to the third son, "You son will be king."

Why would he make that observation? Obvious. He went with the son who had the most insight and could define best what he saw and read best the implications of what he saw.

We all have different ways we look at Easter. John's gospel that we have read from shares with us three ways that even these two disciples plus Mary looked at Easter.

How do you look at Easter? How do you look at the empty tomb?

The first look is the quick look, the surface look. It is represented by this Greek word *blepo*. It's what Mary has in verse 1 and she sees the stone had been removed from the entrance. And John has in verse 5 when he reaching the tomb first because he's a faster runner than Peter – young and in better shape. He simply did what might be called the quick look, a surface look. Just seeing things as they are. But it was a look that did not eventuate in John's going in. It was a look on Mary Magdalene's part that did not eventuate in her going into the tomb either. Both simply looked and in one case left. And in the other case waited.

To me that represents a lot of folks that I talk to and have known in my life who look at Christianity, who look at the message of the resurrected Christ and don't make any judgments about that. They're not antagonistic to that truth, are not antagonistic at all to the gospel, but simply look at it and never come in. Never come in to the life of Jesus never come in to experience personally the truth that the resurrection communicates. That Christ died for our sins and is raised again that we might be saved.

Why do some not go in? It seems to me that there are some clues right from this text in John's gospel.

Some are afraid to look any further. Some are afraid to go in. That had to be Mary Magdala's point of view. It was a terrifying moment for her. She couldn't see clearly from where she was into the tomb was here anyone lurking in there? What awesome event had happened? Were these real angels or masquerading grave robbers dressed in white? What was happening? She was terrified.

Just as you would be terrified if you went to the grave of a loved one and found it open and the person gone. If you were alone you would have a tendency to run.

Some are afraid to look any further into the message of the Lord. There may be reasons why you're afraid. Often people are afraid to get inside because the Lord might require something of them that they do not want to give him. We all know that if he truly is Lord that there are demands that are made upon our life in terms of the loyalty and commitment. You can't simply become a fifty- percent follower of Jesus and a fifty- percent non-follower. When you really step into Jesus and into the room of his truth and his person, the commitment is required.

Some persons maybe get a little skittish at the commitment that may be involved. They're afraid of what might be required of us. So rather that find out we back off.

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As an adolescent one of the things I was afraid of coming to an altar for was that if I came down and prayed the Lord might all me to Africa or something like that. You'll find that when you give your life unreservedly to the Lord that wherever he calls you will agree with you and it will be joy for you to embrace. Sometimes we don't know that when we're looking in from the outside.

Some take a quick look or a surface look because they have looked and gotten a wrong impression before. So they don't go in because the impression is wrong. Look for example at Mary Magdalene when she comes in verse 2 to Simon Peter and to John, the other disciple. She says to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him." She's mistaken isn't she? No one has taken the Lord out of the tomb. There is no *they*. He came out himself. But in that particular moment she is convinced as she stands outside the tomb that the facts are different than they really are. Her perception is far different than what the reality is.

It seems to me again that when I share with persons who have not yet come to faith in Christ that often that faith is withheld because of a wrong impression.

I know of persons who have had an early background of being bought up for example in a church. Maybe it was rather ritualistic and legalistic. They simply couldn't wait until they grew up and were old enough to make their own decisions and get away from all of that stuff. So when you say Christianity, when you say Christ, when you say church, that's what comes to mind. Something stifling. Something unreasonable. Something that chokes human potential. Something that's sad. Something that's just empty ritual. Based upon that caricature of Christianity, that stereotyped symbol that somehow we got programmed with at an earlier age. We may not then later become later open to see what really is involved in becoming a follower of Jesus Christ. Or maybe it is that we have had an image of Christianity projected to us by someone who didn't really live the Christian life. We noticed the tremendous difference between what they said and what they did. And we said, if that's what being a Christian is like forget it. And on the basis of an inadequate information about the Lord but a very real impression made upon us we may choose not to enter into Christ.

Perhaps too some do not want to enter by themselves. That's why they give it the quick or surface look. That appears to be John's situation. He runs fast, comes to the tomb first but he lingers on the outside. He does not go in. Perhaps waiting for Peter before the exploration begins. We look perhaps at persons in our family and really close friends of ours that have not become followers of the Lord. We may be wanting for them to make the entry with us and withholding entering until they do.

Alas, some do not see any connections between the events of that tomb and what is happening in their own life. So our experience with Christ becomes simply a casual look, a surface look. But it eventuates in nothing happening.

The second kind of look is the look that is given by Peter in verse 6. It is the observing look. It is the second word in the Greek language that is use *theoreo*. Peter who was behind him arrived went into the tomb and he saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head.

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They buried people much differently in those days than obviously we do now. There was not a casket used in burial. The body was wound in what I supposed would look like us bandages rolled and rolled around the body, compacted with spices and ointments. John's gospel tells us about a hundred pounds of burial ointment was used in this wrapping process around Jesus so that when the wrapping was done the body was like a cocoon. The main part of the body was wrapped and then around the head was a separate wrapping called here in John's gospel a napkin folded in a particular kind of way. A space generally between the burial clothes surrounding the body and empty space and then moral burial clothes or the napkin about the head.

Peter, when he goes into the tomb, enters the feet would be nearest the door. He goes in and sees these burial clothes lying there. It is more than the casual look. It is the look which sizes up things. Looks carefully. Looks critically. He would see that robbers had not taken the body and carelessly unwound the bandages and left them in a disassembled stack somewhere. It was like the burial clothes had collapsed. The napkin was in a place by itself where it belonged up by the ledge where the head lay the raised part of the stone slab. That's where the napkin was. He looked.

We're not told that it had any effect upon him. It was a careful look as though there are indeed some who come into the room of Christian experience, come into the room of knowing Christ. But then don't really do anything with what they know. They don't make any conclusions. There are many people who I'm convinced personally come into a saving faith in Jesus Christ and never then begin to make deductions as to what impact this is going to make on my life. How is this going to change my attitudes? How is this going to change my actions? How is this going to change my service to God? Careful look but really no effect is made. Simply he says, I agree the grave is empty. The grave clothes are there. It's unusual. Strange.

There are things in our life that may have happened to us that we don't realize the significance of we simply note that they're there.

Every time I'm back in Springfield, Missouri I come to cross an intersection at National and Division street. It means nothing to you if you've never been to Springfield, Missouri. It probably doesn't mean anything to you if you lived there. But National and Division is a very important intersection in my life. There was a railroad track that ran across it. That's where my paper route came to. All during the years I had in Springfield in high school I had that paper route, every day twice a day morning and evening. I'd come to the railroad tracks and I never walked over them. I never road over them. I never road my bike over them. I never road a car over them. That was the end of my world. My world ended at Nashville and Division streets.

I heard that there was a new college they were starting up in town. It was somewhere across town. I didn't know where that was. Later to find out it was just three quarters of a mile down Division street past that railroad track where I would spend nine years of my life – took me that long to get through college I had to come back and teach a few years to know some more. Met my wife.

How my world changed when I finally went across those tracks at Nashville and Division street. For years I knew they were there but I never did anything with it at all. I didn't know that there was anything beyond it.

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I think many times of how it is with service to the Lord. That we may come into the room of experiencing him and sort of go into a state of spiritual experience where we've only gone so far and that's in and we're comfortable with that. They tell us that there's something more in the Christian life. There's something more in terms of commitment and service to God. But we choose to not know where it is or not to go there.

Like Peter we simply look but nothing happens in our action.

It's possible to look and not to change. Either looking at the events of the empty tomb didn't change his view of God. He's still very confused. Because he didn't change his view of God he probably didn't change his view of himself either.

Which leads us to John's entry into the tomb, that other disciple. Verse 8 "Finally the other disciple who reached the tomb first also went inside. He saw [third Greek word for "saw"]. In the King James the word "see" or "saw" is used three different times. But three different words in the Greek. *Horao*. Which means to use the eyes in an apprehending or an understanding way. To be effected by what is seen. To make a conclusion on the basis of what is seen.

That's the whole function by the way of the word "therefore" as it comes to legal debate or resolutions. That "therefore" is a summing up word. It marks a change. We need to see what the conclusion is. In light of what we see, therefore what is going to be our response?

John looks at that empty grave. He looks at the grave clothes and he immediately knows that there are only three possibilities.

One is that some enemies of Jesus could have come in and robbed the body. But he can immediately dismiss that for several reasons. One is the presence of guards at the tomb. But more important than that really is the fact that these grave clothes are laid out in such a way, wholly together as though something had evaporated or gone right out of their midst and the clothes had collapsed, all neatly lying there. The napkin not stripped from his body in reams of strips. But rolled up in a place by itself. Again a vacated shell of the covering.

He could say no one robbing the body would have the skill to just pop the body out of the grave clothes in this way. What motive would they have had? If they had stolen the body they would have made a mess of the grave clothes and they wouldn't have had any reason for taking a naked body into the night. So he knows that it couldn't have been the enemies.

And he knows it couldn't have been Jesus' friends. He'd been with them all, all through that period of time. He knows it couldn't have been the friends. He knows that they would not have desecrated the body by doing this to it. And knows that they didn't have the skill again to arrange the burial clothes in that kind of a way.

So he comes logically to the third conclusion which is he must have risen. God then clearly tells us that they did not know as yet the scripture that he must rise. John becomes the first to believe the resurrection. Not because an angel told them that Jesus had risen. And not because he saw the risen Lord. He had neither. But on the basis of faith he came to see that brought him to a conclusion. He saw and believed.

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Faith is a resting in the sufficiency of the evidences. It is saying here are grounds here that are credible that you can make a decision on. People get spooked by the word “faith,” as though it’s something like you’re supposed to unscrew your head and leave it somewhere and lead with your heart. But true faith can only be based upon credible evidences. And Jesus presented to John credible evidence of his resurrection and he believed.

We use faith every day of our life whether we realize it or not. We truly live by faith whether we’re a Christian or not. We’re choosing to live by faith. We just have to determine what kind of faith we’re going to live with.

Let me illustrate that. This last week I was up at Northwest College in the Seattle, Washington area where I was the spiritual emphasis speaker for the spring semester. I had to take a plane to get there and a plane to get back. That was a trip of faith. I had no guarantee when I got on the airplane that the plane was truly going to make the trip but I had to accept certain things by faith. I had to accept by faith that the designers of the airplane when they designed it knew what they were doing. And that the people who commissioned the airplane to be made in the first place knew what they were doing when they selected the designers. I had to have faith in the plane check people who checked all the designs and drawings for every infinitesimal spot on that airplane. I had to have faith in the raw materials people that when the raw materials were being made when it said steel they weren’t putting in aluminum or sandpaper! I had to have faith in the parts people that took the raw material and made parts and made sure they made the nuts and bolts the proper size so that something wasn’t just hanging loose with an engine ready to tear off as we were soaring about 25000 feet in the air. I had to have faith in the assemblers who put that whole thing together, that they tighten everything and checked it. And I had to have faith in the people who hired the people to assemble and the people who hired the raw materials people and that kind of thing. I had to have faith in the standards of inspection people and faith in the people who trained the standards and inspection people that they trained them properly so that they could look at everything and make sure that it as an ok airplane. I had to have faith in the people who trained the pilots and the air controllers. And the mechanics. Then faith in the pilots and the controllers and the mechanics. I had to have faith in the airline management people who hired and maintained that airplane that they weren’t hiring some bogus guy. I had to have faith in the fuel people that not only produced all the fuel but then took it down to the last step of putting it into the tank, that they weren’t putting something in it that didn’t belong. That they weren’t putting kerosene in it than whatever was supposed to go into jet fuel. And I had never met any of these people. I didn’t know who the pilot was. I didn’t know who the mechanics were. I didn’t know who the designer was. I didn’t know anything about the aircraft other than I got on it not it got me back. I had to trust all the people on the ground between here and Seattle that none of them had a canon trained on that plane to shoot it out of the sky. I figure to make that trip this week I had to trust about 40 million people. I had to have faith in them and the standards which controlled it.

You say, I don’t ever make a decision based on faith. And you never get on an airplane and you never get on the freeway for sure. Faith is resting in the sufficiency of the evidences.

On the freeway if there were no laws and anyone could drive however they wanted – pick your lane and drive whatever way you wanted to point the car – I wouldn’t get on the freeway either.

On the basis of the evidence you have to look at Jesus. What is he? He is either a liar, a legend, a lunatic, or he is Lord. That’s the only four options there are. You can look at all the opinions

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of Jesus and every one of them can fit into one of those four words. Liar, legend, lunatic, or Lord.

John came into that tomb on that first day of the Christian era and said he's got to be the Lord.

A great thing about John's belief in the resurrection was that in the last analysis it wasn't simply based on the empty tomb. That is where he came to the conclusion. But it was the risen Christ's appearance that went on affirming the data of the empty tomb. When you come to the Lord Jesus Christ, and make a decision for him, you will find that he will reveal himself in your experience and he will confirm that decision. But faith is first of all coming to assent, to agree with. God has raised Jesus from the dead and if he's raised from the dead certain effects are put into motion. It means his cross meant something. His cross means that I cannot on my own gain right standing with God. Only Christ can do that for me. Therefore in coming to him my sins are forgiven. It means that it has the effect that my life is purposeful and worthwhile because of the resurrection.

I can hear the apostle Paul saying in 1 Corinthians 15:58 "Therefore be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord because you know your labor in the Lord is not in vein." There is nothing in vein or vanity about life. It is purposeful and meaningful because Christ has ennobled it through his resurrection.

And I have hope. We have an inheritance laid up for us in heaven. Guaranteed and secured for us by the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead.

After the campaign of Waterloo in 1815 all of England was waiting for news of the campaign as to whether or not the Duke of Wellington had been successful in the battle against Napoleon Bonaparte. The fate of Europe rested upon that battle, as you know. Since it was still the days before the invention of the telegraph messages were communicated either by way of messenger or if a body of water separated the distance, the messages could be communicated by semaphore or the wig-wags of flags on a ship. Since the battle had taken place on the continent many people were aligned on the shores of England waiting to see on the island if there were any semaphore signals coming.

In due time one of the ships began to wig wag some words. The words when they were spelled out were these: Wellington defeated.

It was a very overcast day and at that moment of the sending of the semaphore signs. A thick fog which had been hovering up high suddenly moved in and blanked out any further sight. And it is said that the message spread through England that Wellington had been defeated and that sorrow gripped the nation because it had lost the conflict.

When the fog lifted the semaphore signs again started in. The problem before was that the message had been interrupted. The semaphores really were wigwagging the sign: Wellington defeated the enemy. And the attitude of all England changed.

When we look at the cross of Jesus Christ and Good Friday it appears that God is defeated, righteousness is defeated and Jesus has gone down as a lost cause. Jesus defeated. But when we come to Easter and the first day of the week, we find that the message was not ended on Good Friday. The message is this: Jesus defeated the enemy.

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Have you seen that? How do you see the empty tomb?

Our Father, we come to you on this glad Easter morning certain of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It's such an overwhelming truth that even we stagger at language to describe it and wonder even in saying it, it doesn't sound like simply any other phrase. What an incredible phrase! As one who myself goes periodically to the grave, I know how impossible it is for the dead to live. What a truly astounding statement it is to say Jesus of Nazareth crucified, buried, is risen on the third day! There's some, Lord, in this auditorium who perhaps have never walked in to the experience of that truth and even now only look at that truth sort of from a distance while never seeing in their own life if that is real. Perhaps scared or marked or programmed by earlier experiences in their life of what it meant to be a Christian. Therefore to this day standing on the outside. Respectful, not at all an opponent of yours. But someone who has not yet come in and made the great conclusion that you are risen. And if you are risen then we may be too. Help that person to enter this day into you and into the glory of Easter. There are others, Lord, who may have entered the tomb, entered the realm of Christian experience and have really not seen how that great truth is meant to embrace all their life and every aspect of their life is now to be changed by you and every ounce of our energy is to be given to pleasing you and loving you and serving other people. We pray for that deeper look. A look which comprehends and understands and then says what manner of persons are we to now to be. Jesus is risen from the dead. Let the message of the resurrection and the truth it proclaims be our own personal truth. Jesus is risen. Jesus lives in me. We ask in the Lord's name. Amen.