

On this Easter dawn, our hearts rejoice in the words of the gospel of Saint John, chapter twenty, the first eighteen verses. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, change our hearts as we journey to and from your empty tomb. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in our living Lord Jesus,

There are certain places we can go in our world which have left their mark on many people's hearts. The Civil War battlefield at Gettysburg is one such place. At the sight of one of our country's greatest military battles, many people have wept. Many have spent quiet moments in reflection. Here at this sight fellow countrymen fought each other and died. With fire and smoke pouring through their bodies, they gave their all to protect the ways of life they held dear. One side fought to preserve human freedom, another to enslave people like beasts. Both sides were of the same country, but only one could win. Families fought against each other, and killed one another for their cause. On this ground, one of the bloodiest battles in our nation's history was fought. No matter how much people say visiting Gettysburg has changed them, what happened there changed nothing for anyone spiritually. But the victory of Jesus over death we see today has made all the difference in the world to us. When we see the people in the account of Easter, they are eternally changed by their visit to the tomb. **See how people come to Jesus' tomb and see how people leave the empty tomb!**

See how people come to Jesus' tomb! Mary Magdalene arrives first that Easter dawn. She comes to help finish getting Jesus' body ready for burial. But she was in for quite a shock. "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" Mary's heart must have sunk further into grief. Not only had her best friend and Savior died on Friday, now someone had come and stole away his body. It was bad enough they had to leave him not embalmed on Good Friday because of the Sabbath. Now he would never receive a proper burial. Mary did the only thing she could, go tell Peter and John what had happened.

Peter and John come running at this news from Mary Magdalene. We know Peter. We know how he comes running to the tomb of Jesus. Peter's heart is full of guilt. He is weighed down by all of the times his faith has wavered. There is the time Jesus came walking on the water out to the disciples in the midst of a storm. Peter wants to walk with Jesus on the waves. And he does, as long as he keeps his eyes on Jesus. But as soon as he takes his eyes off of Jesus, his confidence becomes, "Lord, save me!" Or how about the events of the last three days? Peter had assured Jesus he would follow him to the end. But Jesus had pointedly told Peter, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will disown me three times." But Peter being Peter, tries to stop Jesus' arrest by cutting off the servant's ear. Instead of commending him, Jesus heals the servant and peacefully allows himself to be arrested and tortured. As he tries to follow Jesus, Peter is seized by fear and denies even knowing Jesus three times at the high priest's house. Then the look from Jesus sends Peter's world crashing down in guilt and shame. These are the

burdens Peter brings to the tomb. They block his understanding of what has really happened here. "They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."

John, who recorded this for us, came running with Peter at the news. After Peter rushes into the tomb, John follows him. His response holds the key to Easter for us. "He saw the strips 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, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed." John's heart was led by the sight to believe what Jesus had told his disciples more than once. On the third day, the Son of Man was raised to life, just as he said.

But finally, these three are not the only ones who come to the tomb of Jesus that first Easter morning. Through the pages of Scripture, we are there, too. How do we come to the empty tomb? We come with another year's worth of guilt. We come another year closer to the day of our own deaths. We come with fears and worries about our daily lives. Will our health take a turn for the worse? How will I get everything done? We come with anger over the way things have turned out for us in the past. We blame the effects of living in a sinful world on God. Our doubts, our guilt, our worries, our fears, our shame, and our sadness over loved ones lost burden our hearts.

But then we get to **see how people leave the empty tomb!** Peter and John leave Jesus' empty grave kind of confused. They had all the facts in their heads, but the events of the last few days had left these saving truths a jumbled mess in their hearts. Don't worry about these two. Their confusion will be short-lived. By the time they sleep tonight, their grief will certainly be turned to joy. The empty tomb made all of the difference to them. On that first Easter evening when Jesus appeared to his disciples, the confusion of their hearts vanished permanently. It was replaced by unspeakable joy. Jesus was really alive. He had come and talked with them to prove it! All of the prophecies were true! Jesus had fulfilled them all perfectly for his believers. The exhilaration of the empty tomb powered Peter and John to become bold witnesses of the risen Christ to the world.

Mary Magdalene is a different story. Her Easter comfort was much more personal. After the two disciples left, she was overcome by her grief. In her sadness, an incredible thing happened. "Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." Finally, her Lord himself comes to her to relieve her distressed and troubled heart. Jesus gently brings Mary Magdalene to rejoice in his resurrection. She leaves the tomb overflowing with joy, knowing Jesus has defeated death for her and all people by his resurrection from the dead.

How about us? How has our visit to the empty tomb this year changed our hearts? Leave the empty tomb rejoicing today knowing your sins are certainly forgiven. No sin is too big for Jesus to forgive if death, the wages of sin, cannot hold him. The burden of our guilt is removed. God is not out to punish us any longer, but only to bless us with his love through our living Lord. Do not let your guilt or worry trouble you. Behold your living Savior to comfort all your fears. He lives to grant you the daily strength you need to face all of your life's struggles and challenges. And when the time of your death comes, do not be afraid. For as Jesus' grave is today, so will yours be one day, too—empty! Through your Lord Jesus Christ real eternal life after death is yours. As he is now, so you too shall one day be—alive forever, free from sin and death and the power of Satan. Come to the empty tomb with all your problems and leave them there, knowing that eternal life free from all your problems is yours in Jesus. Amen.