

The empty grave

John 20:1-18

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

The grave is empty. Jesus has risen! The one whose death we commemorated this Friday was victorious over death and hell. This is not just our faith – these are the facts.

Twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus, St Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Corinth. He told them: if you doubt that Jesus rose physically from the dead, go and ask for yourself. Many people have seen him alive, and of those at least 500 are still alive!

1 Empty grave

We have so many stories from many eyewitnesses, like Mathew, Mark and John. And St Luke researched the matter and spoke with many eyewitnesses, and wrote his own historical account. They all agreed: Jesus from Nazareth who died on Good Friday, rose from the dead 3 days later.

The four Gospel stories have different memories of that first morning; they focus on different aspects of the resurrection of Jesus. The differences in the details are large and sometimes they seem to even contradict each other.

The early church did not try to harmonize the four accounts that we now have in our Bible. That would have been so shameful. These were eyewitness accounts, and you do not tamper with the evidence!

The careful manner in which the church kept those differences in the accounts intact, shows how authentic the descriptions are and this in fact underlines the truth of the central event they all agree about fully - the grave was empty and Jesus had risen from the dead.

When in the early morning after the weekend when Jesus had been crucified, Mary Magdalene and some other women went to the grave, they were shocked.

They wanted to honour the corpse of Jesus with some extra fragrances, but when they arrived, the stone had already been taken away. Maybe they had hoped that the soldiers would help them roll the stone away, but shock: when they arrived, there were no soldiers.

And the stone... John makes clear in his Gospel that the stone was not just rolled away. It had been removed from the entrance. This is not just a rolling aside, but a much more dramatic event. The stone was lifted out of its groove; it lay there in the garden - showing the supernatural aspect of the event.

When Peter and John took a look inside the tomb, they saw that everything inside was very orderly. The bandages were there; the strips of linen that had been wound around the corpse of Jesus and the burial cloth that had covered his head were left behind.

Now someone stealing a corpse from under the eyes of a cohort of Roman soldiers, would he first unwrap the body and even carefully fold the pieces of cloth? No ofcourse.

What is more, no one could take the bandages off the corpse of Jesus. John tells us that when our Lord

was buried, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea used about 40 kilos of myrrh other spices to embalm the body; the two men together had to wrap the corpse in linen with the spices. So these bandages could only with great trouble be taken off the body again.

St John Chrysostom, in his *Homilies of the Gospel of John* 85.4. says:

John tells us [...] that [Jesus] was buried with much myrrh, which glues linen to the body not less firmly than lead; in order that when you hear that the bandages lay apart, you may not endure those who say that He was stolen. For a thief would not have been so foolish as to spend so much trouble on a superfluous matter.

Why was the stone removed? The resurrected body of Jesus could move through walls. For him the stone did not need to be removed. It was for our sake. It shows to us that the grave was empty and that the body could not have been stolen – look at the bandages. Death had been conquered by Jesus Christ the Son of God.

This historical and physical evidence was important, but Mary Magdalene did not get it. When she saw that the stone was removed she ran back to Peter and John: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they have put him.” Mary was so confused. Did she not remember all things Jesus had told her?

2 Peter and John

Peter and John ran to the grave. A lot of running that morning. They looked in, even stepped into the tomb, to see with their own eyes what had happened.

Later, Jesus would appear to Thomas, one of the believers who doubted whether Jesus had risen from the death. He did not believe the stories of the disciples who had seen Jesus. After Thomas saw Jesus, *then* he believed. ‘My Lord and my God’, he exclaimed. And Jesus then says to Thomas:

Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. (John 20:29)

John, when he stepped into the grave and saw the neatly folded bandages, then ‘saw and believed’. (20:8) John is humbly saying of himself: ‘no wonder I believed. I saw the proof of his resurrection with my own eyes. I saw it myself. His body was not stolen, but He rose from the dead!’

Peter and John went back to the other disciples and to their homes. They did not linger at the grave, as Mary did. They had seen enough; they made up their mind. They had become believers in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. I guess they went back home to tell the other disciples what they had seen; the Lord had risen, as he had foretold.

They probably also went home because of the problems with the Jewish leaders. Jesus had been crucified just before the Feast of Passover; during that Feast the religious leaders could not do anything because of the laws of the Sabbath.

But as the Sabbath was over now, it was Sunday, would they now continue persecuting the followers of Jesus? This is the view of some early Church Fathers, like Kirillos of Alexandria, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John XII*:

While the passion of the Jews was at its height, and the rulers were thirsting eagerly for the blood of every man who marvelled at the teaching of the Saviour, and admitted His Divine and ineffable power and glory, but most of all for the blood of the holy disciples themselves, they had good reason for shrinking from encountering them.

Peter and John went home, they kept the doors and the windows closed, and a few hours later, in the evening, they met with the other disciples for discussing the empty grave, and what to do now.

3 Mary

May stayed at the grave when Peter and John went home. She loved her Lord so much. Remember, she had been a woman of low morals. But Jesus had accepted her and given her a new life.

No sin is too large for him; he loves and forgives. Our sins – he forgives them if we humbly and honestly confess them to him. Mary is the one who wept and dried the feet of Jesus with her own hair, thankful that he forgave her sins. And now, as her lord was dead, Mary wept again.

She had come to the sepulchre, to wash the dead body and to anoint it with the ointment she had prepared. A great force of love inflamed Mary. When the disciples departed from the grave, she did not leave.

While Peter and John grasped that He had risen from the dead, Mary continued mourning. Was she more confused than the other disciples? Her mind may have been a mess; her faith chaos. Sadness overwhelmed her but she loved and persisted. And God rewarded her for this.

The theologian and mystic Gregory the Great, in his *Forty Gospel Homilies 25*, wrote:

Mary, while she was weeping, stooped down and looked into the sepulchre. It is true that she had already seen that the sepulchre was empty, and had already reported that the Lord had been taken away. Why did she stoop down again, why did she again long to see? It is not enough for a lover to have looked once, because the force of love intensifies the effort of the search. She sought a first time and found nothing; she persevered in seeking, and so it happened that she found him.

Mary saw angels, and spoke with them, but she was not satisfied seeing some angels. She wanted Jesus. But when He did appear to her, she did not immediately realize it was Him. Did she as a decent woman, turn her eyes down when she thought the gardener had come? Could she not see because of the flood of tears? Was she so confused?

Jesus appeared to Mary. It is very important to see that a woman was the first to see Jesus. Our religion is not a religion of men. It is the faith in our lord Jesus Christ who welcomes women and men alike.

It is also important to note that Jesus appeared first to someone who did not have all things theologically sorted out. But she loved her Lord and she desired to be with Him.

Jesus then opens Mary's eyes by speaking her name as the Shepherd speaks to his sheep. And the sheep know the voice of the Shepherd.

In John 20:1 and 20:10, John calls this woman Mary. When Jesus speaks to her, he uses her Aramaic name: Mariam. The name her parents would have used. When Jesus addresses her most intimately in her own language with her own name, she sees Him.

And Mariam responds in Aramaic: rabboni. 'My Lord', or 'My Teacher'. Rabboni was often used when people spoke of God, the heavenly Master. By saying rabboni, Mary indicated her love and respect for her Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus tells Mary that he will go to 'My Father and your Father and My God and your God'. He is defining a whole new standing for believers in the divine household. Is that why Jesus tells Mary to go back to the 'brothers'? This was a new title for the disciples who now had become sons and daughters of God the Father.

Conclusion

We can learn much from Peter, John and Mariam Magdalene. They were the first to realize that our Lord rose from the dead. Peter and John used their mind, they looked, they saw, and they believed.

And Mary? She was confused, and totally emotional. People come to faith in Christ in many ways.

But it is very encouraging for all of us to see that Jesus revealed himself first to someone who was so sad and so confused. To have it all arranged in our mind is no precondition to meet with Jesus Christ. But to love and to persist.

Jesus calls your name. Gerges. And Nahed. Samir. Emad. Renee. Ehab. Raja. Engy. Bahir. Hoda. Ezméralda. Eman. Magda. David. Awny. Daniel. Fill in your own name. He calls us, to tell us that our past does not matter, and that it does not matter whether we have the whole Christian theology organized in our mind.

He calls your name to show you that He is alive today, beyond our feelings, beyond what we see, beyond our theology. He is beyond all things: He is stronger than death, He is risen, and He unites us with our God and our Father. If only we love Him and persist.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.