

John 20:1-9 [NIV]

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. ²So 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!"

³So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Sergei and Nina Koryakin are a young Russian couple who were part of our church while attending seminary here in town a number of years ago.

It would have been in the early spring of their second semester in town that they called me and asked if they could meet with me. At that meeting, Sergei excitedly asked me about the, quote, "town's plans for Easter."

I had no idea what he was talking about. I said, "What do you mean, the 'town's plans for Easter?'"

So, he asked again, "What will the town of Wilmore be doing for Easter?"

I was still confused by what he meant, but I offered something like, "Well, there will be services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and then a Community Sunrise service early on Easter morning, and then, of course, all the churches will worship later on that morning."

And I'll never forget the look on their faces. They looked stunned and confused and actually disappointed, to the point that I wondered if something was getting lost, you know, between the languages. So, I said something like, "Is that what you meant – what the churches will do?"

And Nina replied, saying, "Well, yes, but what about the rest of the town and the schools and the businesses? We were so impressed by what Wilmore does for **Christmas**: how the town closes down the main street and has all the food and festivities and special things at the churches and the college and seminary. It lasted almost the whole month of December, and it was wonderful. And so, we were thinking that *if all that happens just at Christmas, how much greater will the celebration be here in Wilmore at Easter! So, we want to know when the Easter celebration start?*"

And then, of course, I realized what was going on, and I put on my sociologist hat and said something like, "Well, you have to understand, in the broader American culture, Christmas has taken on a lot more secular

meaning than Easter has, and so Christmas winds up getting a lot more attention and publicity than Easter does."

And I went on to try to explain the differences in how most Americans see these two holidays. But you know, it didn't help – either them or me.

That day, all three of us came to see American culture in a little more realistic light. And it was painful for all of us, because Sergei and Nina were exactly right in their logic and thinking: if the real reason we celebrate Christmas is because of God's giving of the gift of Jesus to us, then how much *more* should we celebrate Easter, when God's gift of salvation comes to fulfillment with the risen Christ and the empty tomb?

Sergei said that even in Russia – even at the height of communism, people still celebrated Easter as the highest of holidays. Even under communism, for weeks before and after Easter every year, Sergei said, "you could walk down the street and greet perfect strangers with the words, 'Christ is risen!' and you would always get from them the response, 'Christ is risen indeed!'"

Even in Russia, "Christ is risen indeed."

We celebrate, and we give and receive gifts on Christmas, to commemorate God's gift of Christ to our world – and that's all completely appropriate.

And yet, I wonder if we truly see that the real *climax* of that gift is found in the emptiness of the tomb on this day – Resurrection day.

Of course, to misunderstand this day is nothing new. From the very beginning, on even that first Easter Sunday morning, Mary discovered the gift, but she didn't understand it – much less receive it.

To Mary, the grave wasn't supposed to be empty.

So, she ran to find the others to tell them, and then Peter and John raced back to the garden to see for themselves. John saw and believed: he believed that the tomb was indeed empty, but he couldn't comprehend why.

And Peter – he didn't know what to think.

So, the two of them went off to look for answers – while Mary stayed behind.

Why did Jesus reveal Himself to Mary first?

Maybe it was because she was hurting the most. Jesus seems to care in special ways about those who hurt.

Maybe because she didn't go off trying to find answers. Maybe she realized that, in times of confusion, the best thing she could do was to stay as close to Jesus as she knew how to be.

That's a good idea, right there.

Maybe it was for that kind of devotion – that kind of commitment and love – that Jesus met her first, and in doing so, gave her the privilege of explaining to others how His empty grave is absolutely God's greatest gift – to you and to me – and to our hurting world.

The world was dead in its sins and evil behavior. Ever since Eden, it has been killing itself – pushing itself further and further away from the God who made it.

That is our world. That was the world into which Jesus was born. And He lived with us here; and He experienced our suffering.

And then after 30 or so years, the time came for Him to say, “Enough! This ends here. The brokenness, the chaos, the despair and hopelessness, it all ends here.”

And He gave Himself for us: the sinless man became the perfect sacrifice, so that by Jesus’ death, we, and our whole world, might find forgiveness.

And then, through Jesus’ resurrection from the dead – because of His empty grave – death itself would be defeated.

There is no greater gift than life – new life – life from the dead, and that’s what Jesus’ empty tomb offers us today.

Years ago, *Leadership* magazine published a story about Philip, a boy born with Down's syndrome. He attended a third-grade Sunday School class in his church with several other eight-year-old boys and girls. Typical of that age, the children didn't immediately accept Philip with his obvious differences, but because of a loving and creative teacher, they began to care about Philip and accept him as part of the group, even if they didn't fully understand him.

One Easter Sunday, the teacher brought a bunch of little plastic eggs like this [hold up plastic Easter egg]. After giving them out to the class, since it was a warm spring day, the children were told to go outside, find some sign, some symbol, for new life, and put it in their egg. And then they'd share what they found at the end of the hour.

So the kids ran around the church property – in wild confusion – and then returned to their room and put their eggs on the table. The teacher, then, began to open them one by one.

After each one, no matter what was inside – whether a flower, a butterfly, a leaf, or maybe just a blade of new, green grass – the class would ooh and ahh.

And then the teacher opened one – but there was nothing inside. And, of course, the children all cried out, “Somebody didn't do what they were supposed to do!”

But then Philip spoke up, “That's mine.”

And one by one the other kids chimed in, “Philip, you did it wrong. There's nothing in your egg! You were supposed to bring back a sign of life!”

“But I did so do it,” Philip insisted. “I meant for it to be empty – just like Jesus’ tomb.”

He's found the best sign of life there is.

And that's the gospel message – the good news for you and me: that Jesus has made life possible for us, such that whatever troubles we may face in life – and we *will* face troubles – they need not be unto death.

Because of Jesus’ empty tomb, a bridge has been built that has reconciled us to God, our creator.

Because of Jesus, life is possible, and forgiveness is available.

There was once a father and his teenage son living in Mexico City. They'd had an argument, and the son, whose name was Juan, cursed his father and stormed out of the house – and didn't come back. The hours turned to days, the days to weeks, and the weeks to months.

The father searched all over the city and finally, in desperation, he went down to the newspaper and took out an ad. It said, “Juan, if you read this, I want you to know that all is forgiven. I love you and will be waiting for you this Sunday afternoon at the entrance to the city park. I hope you come. Love, Dad.”

That Sunday, nearly 200 men named Juan showed up at the park entrance – all looking for forgiveness from their father.

Friends, the ad has been run for you and me. The forgiveness of our Heavenly Father has been offered. A new life, a new relationship, a new start can be ours – all made possible because of Jesus – because He came, because He died, and because He rose again.

That's what Easter means.

If you haven't already, will you put your faith – your trust – in Jesus today, and follow Him, listen to His words and do as He says with all your heart?

You can receive Him today, even as we remember Him – as He asked us to.

Jesus told His first disciples and us, “Take the bread and the cup and remember me – what I've done for you.”

Over these last weeks and days, we've remembered His perfect life.

We've remembered the way His friends betrayed and left Him.

We've remembered His arrest.

We've remembered His unjust trial.

We've remembered His crucifixion.

But today: today we remember His resurrection.

All the grief has turned to joy, just as Jesus said it would, for all who follow Him.

So, would you take the bread – the wafer. It represents Jesus body, given for us – and let's remember Jesus with thanksgiving.

And would you take the cup – the juice that represents Jesus' blood that was shed for us. Let's drink together in praise remembering Him.

We celebrate today that Jesus has done it all to provide forgiveness, and give life – eternal life – to us and to our world.

I wonder if we can pretend we're Russian here – for just for a minute – and declare together once again, “Christ is risen!” “Christ is risen indeed!”

Today, the fear of death is destroyed because Christ is Risen.

“Christ is risen indeed!”

Today we have hope and joy, regardless of circumstance because Christ is risen!

“Christ is risen indeed!”

On this day, the devil and all his demons shake with fear because Christ is risen!

“Christ is risen indeed!”

Today, we find the grave empty, because Christ is Risen!

“Christ is risen indeed!”
Hallelujah and Amen!

Prayer

Closing Hymn - *Hallelujah Chorus*

Benediction:

There was once a missionary in Brazil who discovered a tribe of natives living near a large river in a remote part of the jungle. The tribe was in need of medical care – a disease had ravaged their village and people were dying daily.

A hospital wasn't too terribly far away across the river, but the natives would not go. They would not cross the river because they believed the river was filled with evil spirits, and entering its water, to them, meant certain death.

The missionary explained how he had crossed the river and was unharmed, but they would not believe.

So he took them to the river's edge and put his hand in the water. Still, they wouldn't go in.

He walked into the water up to his waist and even splashed water on his face, but it didn't matter.

Finally, the missionary dove into the river, swam beneath the surface and then emerged on the other side, raising a triumphant fist into the air. He had entered the water and escaped.

Only then did the natives break into a cheer and follow him across.

Today, that missionary is Jesus. He stands on the other side of the grave, his fist raised in triumph, and calls out to all of us, *“Follow me – to life!”*

May we all do that in every way – today, and for all the days of our lives.

Amen and amen.