

The Empty Tomb in an Empty World
1 Corinthians 15
Pastor Dan Erickson
April 21, 2019 (Easter Sunday)

Ladies and gentlemen: In this corner, the challenger – former heavyweight champion, Joe Frazier! And in this corner, defending his title – the heavyweight champion of the world, Muhammad Ali!

Friends, that fight is considered by many to be the greatest boxing match ever – the “Thrilla in Manila” – October, 1975.

But of all the sporting contests, all the political and military battles – none of them equal the matchup we consider today. It is one which actually is occurring at this very moment:

In this corner is the empty tomb – the empty tomb of the risen Christ, the symbol that the Lord is risen indeed! And in this corner, an empty world – an unbelieving world, a world which says Jesus Christ could not have risen from the dead; and if he did, so what? It makes no difference! That is our match today.

Friends, I suspect that even on Easter Sunday, many of us do not see the magnitude of this contest. **Oh yes, we know the church and the world disagree over whether Jesus' tomb was empty. Yet, whether it was or wasn't is not really that important, is it?**

Surely, we can still love and serve other people even if Jesus' body never left that grave. Numerous churches go about their business while proclaiming merely that “the Spirit of Christ still lives” even if his body does not.

So, it doesn't really matter if Jesus' tomb was empty that first Easter morning, does it?

Well, friends, I am here today because I believe the empty tomb of Jesus Christ really does matter! In fact, I think it is, likely, more important than we could ever imagine.

So today, my hope is that each of us will grow in our understanding of the significance of the empty tomb in this empty world, and that we will also see more clearly the importance of Jesus' resurrection to our own lives. Let's pause and pray that would happen.

Before we talk about the significance of the empty tomb, **we need to consider what really happened that first Easter Sunday.** Some of you may be tempted to view the assertion that Jesus rose from the dead as being on the same level as a headline in a tabloid like The Weekly World News, which recently has featured stories about people booking one-way trips to Mars and more space aliens serving in the U.S. Senate.

Let me assure you, however, that this is reality! When the women went to Jesus' tomb that first Easter morning, it was empty. Jesus was not there. **That is the rather clear testimony of all the historical evidence.**

The real question is how did the tomb get empty? Over the centuries, people have come up with various explanations as to what happened.

#1 The first and earliest one, reported to us in Matthew 28:12-13 is that Jesus' disciples stole the body.

Somehow these eleven men overpowered armed Roman guards, rolled away a huge rock at the mouth of the tomb, took out Jesus' body, hid it somewhere and then spread the rumor he had risen from the dead.

There is an obvious flaw in this explanation, however. If the disciples knew Jesus' resurrection was a hoax, why did they risk their lives and ultimately give up their lives over the next thirty plus years proclaiming the resurrection had really happened.

Certainly one of them, as he was about to be beheaded or thrown in a pot of boiling oil, would have said, “Hey guys, I did not know you were so serious about this. It is just a joke! If you let me go, I will tell you where Jesus' body is.” None of them did that. They couldn't. They had not taken the body from the tomb.

#2 Some claim the tomb of Jesus was empty because the Romans or Jewish leaders took the body.

Yet again, this explanation is very inadequate. If either group had the body of Jesus, or knew where it was, they would have certainly produced it to refute the claims of Jesus' disciples.

When Peter, John or Paul were proclaiming that on the third day Jesus rose from the dead, they would have said, "I don't think so. We can show where his body is. We have it." They did not say that because they couldn't. They did not have Jesus' body.

#3 A third explanation is known as the "Swoon Theory," which was made popular back in the 1960's in the book, "The Passover Plot."

The claim here is that Jesus never died on the cross, but merely passed out. Mistakenly thinking he was dead, the soldiers placed him in the tomb. Within a short time, he regained consciousness, somehow moved the huge rock which sealed the tomb, overpowered or snuck past the Roman guards and convinced the disciples he had risen from the dead.

He was able to do all that just after having nails driven through his hands and feet and a spear thrust in his side. As someone said, if Jesus could do that, it was probably an even greater miracle than rising from the dead!

Friends, the only explanation as to why the tomb was empty that makes sense is that Jesus really did rise from the dead!

Again, I am not talking about some type of spiritual resurrection. When someone dies, we often say things like, "Even though she is gone, she will always be with us in spirit." No. We are talking about a whole person, including body, going from being dead to being alive!

Now, many intelligent people are skeptical about the empty tomb. We need to realize, however, that the reason for their skepticism is not the historical evidence. The reason, rather, is a bias – a bias that says dead people stay dead! This is what keeps many folks from even considering the empty tomb.

Friends, we live in an empty world full of empty people. Yet, the facts point to what the Bible

teaches: The tomb was empty because Jesus Christ had risen from the dead!

Now, let's shift gears and come to grips with a second reality – we live in an empty world.

Maybe you are thinking, "What do you mean, Pastor Dan? There are 7.5 billion people on the planet. How can you say the world is empty?"

Well, you are right; but when I say the world is empty, I mean that **both societies and individuals lack meaning, purpose and hope.**

Friends, today it is impolite, or at least politically incorrect to even mention the words "right and wrong."

A few years ago, Dr. Joyce Brothers, the well-known psychologist, said, "I don't deal with whose fault it is or right and wrong. I just deal with what works. The assumption is whatever choice an individual makes is "right" for that person."

Yet, this moral relativism, a lack of absolute values and rejection of right and wrong, inevitably leads to moral chaos.

One British historian noted that the attitude which now dominates American culture existed in Europe in the 1920's. There, secularism – a rejection of traditional Christianity – led to moral relativism, which led to a lack of self-restraint, which then led to repressive governments (like Hitler's and Stalin's) that were expected to bring restraint.

Voltaire, the 18th century French atheist, said he "never talked about atheism in front of the maids." Though he loved to ridicule Christianity, he felt that if the maids became atheists, they would steal everything he had.

The Russian novelist Dostoevsky was right when he wrote, "If there is no God, then everything is permissible."

Perhaps a good illustration of the emptiness of our world is so-called "reality TV." Showing women who have fallen in love with their daughters' boyfriends highlights the shallowness and depravity of our culture.

When I was growing up, I would often watch Mutual of Omaha's "Wild Kingdom." It focused on how animals struggle for survival. "Reality TV" is often a human 'Wild Kingdom' where people are portrayed as animals simply trying to fulfill their appetites.

Many folks, however, find that life without moral standards, where you just do your own thing, doesn't bring happiness. Pleasure doesn't equal satisfaction. People with empty lives try to fill up on money, sex, sports, alcohol, toys and TV – but it doesn't work.

All the attempts by philosophers and psychologists to fill the void left by the rejection of Christianity also fall short. We remain empty people until we realize there is a God-shaped vacuum, a God-shaped hole, inside each one of us that can only be filled by the Lord himself.

Augustine was right when he prayed, "Lord, our hearts are restless until we find rest in You."

Friends, we live in an empty world, full of empty people. Yet today, on Easter Sunday, that empty world comes face to face with the empty tomb. We are going to turn to the Bible – to 1 Corinthians 15 – and note three things that happen when this occurs (page 961).

#1 There is confrontation because the empty tomb says the world is wrong, terribly wrong.

Some people say, "When I die, I will simply rot. I will become worm food. That will be it."

The empty tomb says, "No! There is life after death."

1 Corinthians 15:16, 20 – And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.

The world says, "We only go around once in life, so we have to grab for all the gusto we can." Paul says that would be true (verse 32) if the dead are not raised. "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." But, he says, the dead are raised; and thus, such an attitude is foolish. The world says "after

death, it is all over." The empty tomb says, "Wrong! It is just beginning!"

1 Corinthians 15:22 – For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

I find it ironic that the world longs for immortality. Some folks want to clone body parts so that people can get physical overhauls that will enable them to live to be 200 years old.

Some who are sick even have their bodies frozen so that when doctors find a cure for their illness, they can be brought back to life and healed.

One reason many are attracted to New Age religions is because of their fascination with the idea of living on, in an endless cycle of reincarnation, being born again and again and again.

Yet, the empty tomb confronts the world and says, "No. The only way to eternal life is Jesus. For in Christ all will be made alive!"

Friends, this confrontation makes the world quite uncomfortable. I think the Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs serve as coping mechanisms. People cannot ignore Easter, but neither can they admit that it's true.

Yet, no matter how uncomfortable it is, the world, and each of us in this room, needs to listen because the empty tomb confronts the world with truth.

Friends, maybe you are uncomfortable with the empty tomb and with the Easter message, but no matter how hard you try, you cannot ignore Jesus Christ.

You have to make a choice. As God's Spirit enables, you can acknowledge him as the risen Lord and embrace him as your Savior. Or, you can reject him.

You can continue to pretend you are just fine as you are and that you don't need his help. It is your choice. I pray by God's grace, you will make the right choice. If you would like someone to talk with you or pray with you about this, please come up after the service.

#2 The second thing which happens is that the empty tomb comforts the empty world.

The message of Jesus' resurrection gives comfort and hope, especially during the difficult times of life. Anyone who has stood by the grave of a loved one and anyone who has been told they have untreatable cancer wants to believe the Easter message. It is the only true hope.

As verse 22 says – “In Adam we all die (every human being faces that destiny) but in Christ all will be made alive.” In Christ, as verse 55 says, “death is swallowed up in victory.”

The empty tomb provides great comfort when approaching death. As one Christian said on his death bed, “I have pain, but I have peace.” That’s because of Jesus’ resurrection.

Yet, the empty tomb also brings comfort in this life. In this chapter, Paul acknowledges that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then there is no reason to risk suffering by doing what is right and good. He tells us, as Christians:

1 Corinthians 15:17, 19 – And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.

Yet, if the tomb is empty, if Jesus is risen indeed, that is reason enough to devote our lives to loving God and serving other people.

Friends, one day when the Day of Resurrection comes, which Paul says surely will happen because Jesus rose from the dead, it will not really matter how much we accomplished in our career, how much money we left behind in our bank account, how many friends we had, or even how much we did for the church.

What will matter is whether or not the Lord says, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” What God thinks about how I am living my life is far more important than what anyone else thinks – or even what I think.

And so, friends, maybe there are people at work or school who ridicule you because of your faith in Christ. Maybe you have missed opportunities for financial gain because of your honesty. Perhaps

you don’t have as big of a house, as new of a car or as nice of a boat as your friends because you gave money to the church and shared with people in need.

You might be hurting because of a broken relationship which resulted from your insistence that Jesus Christ be the #1 priority in your life.

If any of these things have happened or if you are suffering or hurting in some way today because of your faith in Jesus Christ, find comfort in the empty tomb, which means those who trust and follow Jesus can look forward to eternal joy!

#3 The third thing which happens when the empty tomb faces the empty world is that the church, we as Christians, are called to proclaim the Easter message.

The empty world needs to be confronted with the truth of Jesus’ resurrection. It needs to be comforted by the hope that only his conquest of death can give.

Now, maybe you came here today thinking Easter is a nice story. It makes you feel good. You like singing the songs. But it is about much more than that.

The resurrection of Jesus is our only hope in a hopeless world. And it is our responsibility, our privilege, to share that message with others. We need to realize that lives are being destroyed because people are filling themselves with things with which they were never meant to be filled.

Human beings were never meant to be filled with just friends, jobs, cars or games. It is our privilege to tell them of the hope and joy which can be found in the risen Lord.

After sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with one of his colleagues, William Gladstone, who was then the Prime Minister of Great Britain, said, “I have accomplished more today than in all my years in Parliament.”

Friends, we may be relatively ordinary people, but we have experienced the empty tomb. That means that tremendous things can happen – 1,986 years ago, eleven men and some women saw the empty tomb. They learned what it meant, and by the power of God, turned the world upside down. By

God's grace, I believe we can start to do the same in this community!

Friends, today, Easter Sunday 2019, we are called to celebrate and share. If we are trusting in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, we have every reason to celebrate. I hope you will do that as we continue to worship.

And we are called to share this magnificent truth with others. I would suggest you identify one person you know who needs to hear and understand the message of the empty tomb. Then, ask God to give you an opportunity to somehow share that great news with that individual this week.

Friends, the tomb is empty. The Lord is risen indeed. That is the message each of us in this room, and everyone in the world, needs to hear, believe, embrace and celebrate!