

*The Tale of the Temporary Tombstone*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Ezekiel 37:1-14; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:1-18*

Our final Scripture reading today is from John 20:1-18. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “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!” So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. 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. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to their homes, but 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.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. “Woman,” he said, “why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.”

Tombstones are permanent – at least, they’re meant to be. We can find headstones dating back at least 700 years, and some potentially a good deal older than that. Many cultures around the world buried their dead and made some sort of memorial at the spot. We use a permanent marker to mark our impermanence. A great number of tombstones see far more years than the people whose graves they mark ever did!

And we take good care of tombstones. We have caretakers who oversee cemetery grounds and care for headstones. To intentionally damage or deface a headstone still makes a lot of us really angry. People still visit and place flowers, pull weeds, and take care of the plots of their loved ones. Until 1920, it was common in America for people to picnic in graveyards! There’s a sense of peace for some in cemeteries, sometimes a sense of permanence, that this is where we are all headed. But there’s also something more – the thought that those who have died are in some way yet still with us. We want that to be the case. We sense it to be the case. Belief systems around the world are very different, but almost all of them believe in some form of life after death. We are met with a paradox – we know that death is permanent, yet we know (against the plain facts of the case) that life doesn’t just end. It’s like it’s programmed in us.

With all this in mind, we come to Jesus and the tale of the temporary tombstone. It's because of Jesus that we who are Christians believe all tombstones to be only temporary. We believe in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting. We believe all who turn to Jesus, confessing their sins and following His ways instead, will be forever a part of God's eternal Kingdom. And we believe this because of Easter. The reality is, every Sunday is a remembering of Easter, because every Sunday we come together confident of Jesus' resurrection. And yet on this particular day, we focus specifically on what happened and why it matters.

By Friday afternoon, Jesus is dead. There is no question about this for any witnesses; there's no thought of Jesus swooning on the cross as some have theorized. He has been brutally beaten in such a way that did sometimes kill by itself; He has hung on a cross for nine hours with nails in His hands and feet; after His death, He is stabbed in the side just to be certain. He has been utterly brutalized. They made an example out of Jesus – they didn't want Him just killed, they wanted Him so humiliated that His followers would be embarrassed even to say His name.

And while the disciples didn't understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead, the leaders of Israel understood enough of what Jesus had said to know that they needed to have His body to prove His death. Working with Pilate, the high council has a Roman guard established at the tomb to avoid any possibility of theft. The tomb itself was covered by a great stone – and if it was a typical tomb of the era, it took several men to roll that stone up an incline to get in and out. It was done that way to discourage grave robbers. Not only that, but the authorities have it sealed. You'd have to have a death wish to break the seal of the empire without permission. The Bible does not hide these facts from us but puts them front and center. Jesus was dead, and there was no way anyone was getting to His body.

When Mary goes to the tomb to anoint Jesus – and other women are with her, the other gospels tell us –she expects the guard and the tomb. Because it was still possible to travel on a Sabbath, word probably spread about the guards being there. That's what the high council intended in the first place, for everyone to know Jesus was right where He'd been buried. They expect that the guards will have to let them in, *if* they let them in. It was very unlikely they would have been able to move the stone themselves.

When Mary arrives to find no guard, the stone rolled away, and Jesus' body gone, she assumes the worst. She goes back to the disciples not to tell them that Jesus was resurrected, but that she couldn't find Him. The authorities had already done so much to Jesus, but I'm sure it was easy to think that they had already removed His body for their own purposes. And yet, when Peter and John run to the tomb, they find the grave clothes lying there. What sense would it make for anyone to have unwrapped Jesus' body? They don't yet fully understand, but they know this is not the work of the Roman guard. Something else has happened.

Peter and John eventually go back home; they may have started to understand what had happened. But it seems Mary is left in the lurch. She's still terribly upset, still looking for Jesus' body, looking back into the tomb. She sees angels, she even sees Jesus, and she's so distraught she just asking Him where Jesus' body might be. It isn't until the moment Jesus says her name that she realizes the truth. But once He does that – once He says Mary's name – in a moment she understands, her eyes are opened, and she knows her Lord and Savior has risen from the dead.

The tombstone was temporary. Jesus rose from the grave and reigns over all creation for all time. He returns to the Father only to show Himself later that day to the disciples. Over forty days, to over five hundred people, Jesus appears. He even later appears to Saul, who would despite his persecution of Christians would become the first century's greatest evangelist to the non-Jewish world. These witnesses endured lasting, brutal persecution for spreading the name of Jesus, and yet they did it anyway. Despite the incredible shamefulness of His death, their encounters with the risen Jesus so changed them that they could not remain silent. Each detail we learn about the resurrection story makes it more and more clear that this was not a myth or a legend but the breaking through of God into our real history.

What does this all mean for us, though? The Jewish messiah being raised to life after being crucified – even if it is true, which I absolutely believe, what meaning does it have for us? In a world that seems so far removed from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, does the resurrection have an impact on the way we live our daily lives? It should, and here are a few reasons why.

First: *Jesus is alive even now!* The tombstone is permanently temporary. We read of many people revived in the Bible, who were genuinely dead and were brought back to life. Lazarus might be the most famous example. Eventually, though, after living their natural lives, they too died. But that is not the case with Jesus. Jesus came to life, stayed alive, and was taken up to the heavens forty days later, still very much alive.

This means so many things for believers even now. We worship the living breathing Jesus. We do not worship an idea or a concept; we do not believe that Jesus stayed dead and merely rose spiritually, because that not only doesn't fit the evidence, it gives us no hope. We could say that about anybody and it would have no meaning.

No, Jesus physically returns from the grave, bearing the scars of His crucifixion as markers of His triumph over death itself. The disciples believed it was possible that Jesus had risen spiritually; at first, Luke 24 tells us, they were frightened because they thought Jesus was a ghost! Instead, Jesus lets them see and touch Him. They still are astonished, so He eats in their presence just to prove He's not a ghost! Because many people have claimed to see ghosts. It's another thing entirely for over 500 people to see Jesus literally in the flesh after His resurrection.

Because Jesus is alive, He is there for us. He hears our prayers and responds. He intercedes for us, the only true intercessor between the Father and us. He asks the Father for the Holy Spirit to be sent to us, to live within us and work in our hearts to change us, so we know we are never alone in this world. The Holy Spirit is a gift from the Father sent in the Son's name. When we pray, when we worship, when we read Scripture, when we obey and do faithful deeds, it's all in glory and honor of our living Lord and Savior.

Friedrich Nietzsche was a philosopher best known for his saying, "God is dead." You can go to Germany and see his grave. John Lennon said that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. Three years later the band broke up, and you can visit his memorial in Central Park. Christopher Hitchens was an intellectual and critic who wrote *God Is Not Great*. You can't go see his grave because he didn't want one, but at his death, his body was donated to medical science. We've seen the last of him.

But we've never seen the last of Jesus. And that's important because of this second vital fact for today: *He was resurrected for our justification before the Father.* Romans 4:25 says, "Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." It's wrong to think that the entire process of salvation ends on Good Friday. When Jesus said, "It is finished," on the cross, He was correct, but He was only speaking about His part, the conclusion of that part of His role as He died for our sins. But the process of salvation continues on to Easter when Jesus is raised to justify us, and it continues on even now as the Holy Spirit works within us to sanctify us and make us more holy day by day. It is true to say that we *were* saved, we *are* saved, and we are *being saved* even now.

The cross is never the end point. Paul makes this clear in I Corinthians 15 where he says in verse 14, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless...and so is your faith." He doubles down in verse 17, "If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for your sins." That's how vitally important it is to believe in the message of Easter, that Jesus is alive. We only find hope in the cross when it leads to the temporary tombstone and the empty grave.

Because our justification is paramount. The only way anyone can become a part of the Kingdom of God, to be adopted as God's children, as daughters and sons, is to be justified before Him. To be justified means simply to be declared "not guilty" – not guilty of sin, not guilty of unrighteousness, not guilty of all our disobedience.

We are declared righteous – right with God – not by anything we have done but by Jesus' death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection, showing His victory over sin and death. When we believe and trust in Jesus, showing our faith in Him by obeying His commands to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves, God looks at us and does not see our sin but sees Jesus' perfection standing in for us. That can only happen if Jesus was raised from the dead.

This is why every church around the world celebrates Easter. Some churches celebrate all sorts of holidays, all sorts of saints gone by are remembered. Being in an area dominated by the Catholic and Lutheran church, that's what most of us know. But there have been churches who got rid of the church calendar and all the holidays. There have been churches that did not celebrate Christmas. But Easter...that's different. Even churches that don't celebrate other holidays will almost always tell you, "To us, every Sunday is Easter Sunday." A church that doesn't celebrate Easter at all in any way simply isn't a church. Because only by Jesus' resurrection are we justified by the Father and have proof of His triumph over sin and death.

If these things are true, that Jesus is alive and He was resurrected for our justification, if believers are now justified through faith in Jesus and brought into the Kingdom of God, then some more things still hold true. And one is this: *faith, joy, and joyful obedience are to be the believer's stock-in-trade.* Faith is the most basic one. Faith defines the believer. Faith is saying, "While I don't have every evidence I might want, this is where I stand. Jesus is who I trust and love and obey because He loved me first, gave His life for me, and washed me of my sins." Faith is essential; without faith, no other action we take matters.

Second, we Christians are the joyful people. Yes, circumstances and trials and tragedies will still bring us sorrow, but a Christian who knows and follows the Savior is characterized by joy! Not because life is easy but because our lives have meaning...because our lives have been rescued from despair...because we have confidence in life after death...because we have know a bright future awaits us beyond this life. We have joy that is not temporary happiness, but lasting peace because we are forgiven and can now live lives pleasing to God.

And so joyful obedience to Jesus' teaching also becomes our primary motivation in life. Not because we are saved by our good deeds; we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone to the glory of God alone. And yet, faithful obedience is the sign of true faith. I think about all the little things Catha and I do for one another over the course of a week, things because we love and care about one another. And yet I've never sacrificed my life for her or she for me. It's just part of love. In the same way, Jesus loves us and *has* given His life for us. Doing what He asks is no great obligation or burden if we understand it right. It's simply doing what our beloved Jesus asks of us, which is ultimately for our own good as well.

But here's my last thought: *if we are to believe, we need to hear Jesus speaking our name.* Mary didn't recognize Jesus until He said her name and her eyes were opened to who He really was. In a spiritual sense, the same thing needs to happen to us. I don't mean literally; I don't mean you need to hear the actual voice of God before you are a believer. But we need to hear God calling to us. Ultimately, God must implant faith into your heart. God must open your eyes. You can't create saving faith in Jesus out of willpower. God is the One who saves us; it is God who does the work. Our faithful response is to the saving work God has already done.

Your parent's faith or your wife's faith or the faith of your church cannot save you. We need to hear God calling us and recognize Jesus as our personal Savior. We need to realize our lives are in His hands. We need to know Jesus, and we need Him to know us. If we do not hear the voice of Jesus calling our name on a spiritual level, all I've said today will just sound at best like a bunch of nice words, or maybe far worse. But if we hear His call, we know our lives cannot be the same. We will know Jesus has redeemed us from our rebellion against God, and redeemed us to a life of joyful obedience and an eternal life of wonder in God's presence.

If you know that God is calling your name, if you cannot deny the truth, if your eyes have been opened to the reality of the resurrection and the temporary tombstone, don't let the voice fade and the world obscure your vision. Turn to Christ. Turn away from your sins and ask Christ to forgive them, and He will. Ask for the Holy Spirit, and you will have Him always with you to guide you in righteousness. Do not delay. And if you come today with a sad heart, where once you'd heard the voice but you are now not sure, if the grief of this world or the trials you face have been shouting in your ears, if the temptations of the world have made the call of God grow dim, don't despair. God's call is still there. Listen closely and you'll still hear it. It is never too late, as long as you draw breath, to heed that call.

Friends, may we rejoice today! The grave is empty. The tombstone is temporary. The Savior has risen and reigns forevermore, conquering death and promising us resurrection to eternal life! May we go and spread the word – hope is alive, faith will not go unrewarded, and love has a name – Jesus Christ. Amen and hallelujah!