

For This: He Came to Open the Way

Mark 16:1-7

Introduction

On March 4, 1921 the United States Congress approved a burial site in Arlington National Cemetery for an unidentified American soldier from World War I. The site did not have a formal name at that time, but it would soon become known as the "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier." President Warren Harding officiated at the actual entombment of that soldier on November 11 that same year.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is guarded 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, by soldiers from the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment. These soldiers work in 24-hour shifts. Every hour on the hour from October through March and every half hour from April through September there is an elaborate ceremony where the guard changes. If you ever have a chance to be there, you will be left in awe. I highly recommend it.

The ceremony starts with the relief commander announcing the Changing of the Guard on the plaza. The Tomb Guard marches 21 steps behind the Tomb, turns, faces east for 21 seconds, turns and faces north for 21 seconds, then takes 21 steps down the mat and repeats the process. The number 21 is meant to symbolize a 21 gun salute.

Some 1900 years before Congress created the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier military guards were stationed around another tomb that had just received its first body. Those guards were put there by the ruling government to make sure the tomb was not disturbed by anyone for any reason.

We still don't know the identity of the soldier in that tomb in Arlington, but we do know the identity of the person in this tomb from 1900 years ago. His name is Jesus. He died at 3 p.m. on the Friday of Passover week. The actual date was probably April 7, 30 A.D. According to Jewish Law the Sabbath day began at 6 p.m. on Friday. Another Jewish Law said that the bodies of executed people had to be buried before the Sabbath would begin. That meant that there were only three hours to make all the necessary arrangements.

Fortunately, a man named Joseph from the small village of Arimathea stepped up and offered his tomb so that Jesus could be buried there. Joseph was a member of the Jewish ruling council and secretly was a follower of Jesus. Those two facts about Joseph don't mesh well. So in an incredible act of bravery and political suicide, Joseph stepped forward to claim the body of Jesus. He buried Jesus in his own tomb in those limited minutes before the Sabbath was to start.

Because of the time factor, putting Jesus in the tomb was about all that could be done. Jews did not embalm, but they did wash the bodies of their deceased and surrounded those bodies with strong smelling perfumes to lessen the smell as the bodies decayed.

- You might remember an earlier story where a woman named Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with a burial perfume. According to the story, the aroma filled the house.

Because of the time, that special, loving act didn't get done. Jesus was placed in the tomb and the people who loved Him most didn't get to do the most basic, loving things that were normally done for someone who died.

- In this past year there have been many families that did not get to do the "normal" loving things for a deceased loved one. Way too often we read the following sentence in an obituary "Because of the coronavirus, we will not" If you have personally experienced that, you have some sense of what the loved ones of Jesus were experiencing in those three hours.

The first available moment for anyone to do any of the normal care for the deceased was Sunday morning. The Jewish Sabbath concluded at nightfall on Saturday. Given the lack of electricity and the presence of those Roman soldiers, going to the tomb in the middle of the night was not an option. So at daybreak four women set out to perform the task. Mary, the mother of Jesus, her sister, a friend named Salome and Mary Magdalene are the women we normally associate with doing this task.

These four women knew what they wanted to do, but they left their homes at dawn's early light with no idea about how they were going to do it. Tombs did not come with doors. In front of the opening of the cave-like tomb like the one owned by Joseph was a groove, and into the groove was rolled a large circular stone – something as big as a large wheel on an ox cart. It had to be big enough to seal the opening. The women knew that it was well beyond their strength to move a stone like that. But still they went.

They left their homes that morning with a single burning question on their minds:

Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" (Mark 16:3)

Ultimately that is a barrier question, isn't it? In their minds, that stone was the object that was keeping them from being in the presence of Jesus. If it weren't for that stone! Little did they know that the barrier was already gone.

The barrier they feared would keep them out had already been removed by Jesus.

Here is the truth for this Easter Sunday:

Jesus came to **OPEN** the way.

In short this truth means that the barriers are gone. Everything we once feared would keep us away from the presence of Jesus has been rolled away. Moved. Eliminated. That is the message of Easter! Christ is risen, and the barriers are gone.

When He rolled the stone away, Jesus opened the way ...

#1: THE WAY BACK

When the women arrived at the tomb that day, they found that the barrier they had worried about was already gone ... and in its place they found a “young man dressed in a white robe.” Let's call him an angel. This angel had a message and a command. The message simple and comforting:

Don't be alarmed. He has risen! He is not here. (Mark 16:6)

These four women looked around and saw the tomb was indeed empty. It was true! He HAD risen. The rock shelf where they had laid Him just 36 hours ago was vacant except for the grave clothes in which they had hurriedly wrapped Him. As they were mentally processing all of this stunning news, they heard the angel's command:

Go tell his disciples and Peter, “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 1:7)

Ah, the disciples and Peter. Those poor distraught men. Those men who had walked with Jesus, dined with Jesus, listened to His teachings, witnessed His miracles ... and boldly pledged that even if everyone else would abandon Him, they would remain faithful...

But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same. (Mark 14:31)

... only to run away when the pressure came. These disciples, and especially Peter who had messed up the most. Tell these men that Jesus wanted to be with them once again.

The disciples and Peter didn't deserve that kind of response from Jesus. But they got it anyway. And so do we. It's a response we call “grace.” And the missing stone on Easter Sunday opens the way for a lot of grace to flow.

There are people – maybe people listening to me right now – who can recite all the reasons why God should have nothing more to do with them. They know they've messed up. They know they haven't followed through. They can recite the litany of their sins as easily as they can tell you their address and phone number. They have a large stone barrier between themselves and God. Jesus is on one side. They are on the other. And they asked with all sincerity:

Who will roll that stone away?

I can answer that question for you today. The stone is already gone. The truth of Easter is that Jesus came to OPEN the way, the way back to a live giving relationship with Him. He wants to be with you. There is no stone too big.

When He rolled the stone away, Jesus opened the way ...

#2: THE WAY FORWARD

As those women approached the tomb that day, they knew – at least they THOUGHT they knew – one certainty. Jesus was dead. It was over. They had heard say as much from the cross:

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)

For the last three years they had followed Him. Their lives had been wrapped up in Him. Like the disciples, they too had heard the teachings and witnessed the miracles. But today they had one last thing to do – place the spices around His body. Once they had done that it would be over. And then what?

The message of that angel to round up Peter and the rest of the disciples sparked new life into these heartbroken women. It was NOT over. It was just beginning.

One of the Gospels says that the women hurried off to find the disciples. I'll bet! They had great news to share! These women now had a meaningful purpose for their lives. They had a story to share, a story about how Jesus had rolled away the stone of despair that had settled in their hearts and released a fountain of joy inside of them.

One writer said this:

Because our Lord is a living Lord there are new wonders and new truths waiting to be discovered all the time.

In the 1930s, there was a very poor man living down in West Texas by the name of E. L. Yates. Mr. Yates was a sheep farmer who struggled to make a living on his farm. Several times he had contemplated filing for bankruptcy and allowing the bank to repossess his farm. He was constantly worrying about how he could pay his bills and feed his family.

One day a survey crew from an oil company came to him and asked for permission to drill for oil on his property. The contract stated that he was to receive every eighth barrel if any oil was found. At 1,115 feet they hit a gusher. The well produced 80,000 barrels of oil a day! Wells soon followed that could produce twice that capacity. Even thirty years later government surveys showed wells with a capacity for 125,000 barrels a day. It proved to be one of the richest veins of oil ever found on the North American continent. Mr Yates owned it all! During all the years of poverty he was rich and didn't know it.

Sometimes I think that many Christians are in the same situation as Mr. Yates. Jesus rolled away the stone, He opened up a life of joy and peace – a life of victory despite the circumstances that each of His followers is entitled to live. By responding in faith we can claim what is already ours. Are you living every day in His power and victory?

When He rolled the stone away, Jesus opened the way ...

#3: THE WAY FOR ALL

When Peter went to the house of Cornelius, he was able to see firsthand that the good news of Easter wasn't just for the Jews. It was for everyone, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, educational level, or income level. Peter expressed it like this:

“How could anyone object to these people being baptized? (Acts 10: 47)

There are no barriers to a vital faith in Jesus Christ. Another verse of Scripture says this:

To all who would receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12)

And that greatest of all verses echoes that thought.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Whoever. No barriers. Jesus has opened the way.

APPLICATION

I'd like to extend an invitation to anyone who might be listening today.

- The greatest joy of Easter isn't a chocolate bunny; it is an empty tomb.
- It isn't found in a piece of Rolo candy; it is found in a stone that has been rolled away.

If you don't know what it means to be in a relationship with Jesus Christ, I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

Heavenly Father,
I confess that I have sinned against you. I now ask for your forgiveness for all my sins. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for me and opened the way for me to have eternal life with you. I give you my life and ask Jesus to come into my heart. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer just now, let me be the first to welcome you to the family of God. I'd love to talk more with you about what that means. Please let me know.

Let's pray ... Amen.