

What You Don't See: Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016
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Happy Easter! He is risen!

What a joy to be with you today, on this day of all days. The day we celebrate as Jesus' new birthday, I guess you could say. The first day of the rest of his life. The first day of a completely new life – for all of us — one that is no longer overshadowed by death. The first day of a new world order.

It's a day marked by what you *don't* see. By what was *not* found. Sometimes it's *what you don't see* that counts. I'm reminded of a friend, whose name was Justin. He'd arrived at the local hospital for surgery, his arm having been broken in various places. He'd seen a doctor earlier in the week who'd taken xrays and found that the arm could not be treated with a simple cast. He showed Justin the xrays; it was obvious that the breaks were bad, the bones out of alignment. They scheduled surgery and now Justin had arrived.

But the xrays had been misplaced and so the surgeon ordered new xrays taken. Afterwards, Justin waited in a small cubicle. It took longer than he expected. Finally the surgeon, the xray tech and the hospital administrator entered his room, all kind of scratching their heads. The surgeon again examined Justin's arm, and finally delivered the news: the xrays revealed no break. No problem whatsoever. The bones were in perfect alignment. No surgery was needed. He could go home.

I happen to know both Justin and the hospital administrator. This is a true story. It was a miracle of healing, and Justin tells the story to this day. And my point here is this: the good news was in what they *didn't see*. No break was visible on the xray. No problem was discovered in that morning's exam. Sometimes it's what you don't see that counts.

This is the Easter story in a nutshell, although it has far greater magnitude than a broken arm. In fact, the results of that day are so far-reaching that it has changed all of human history. Because of that day, our calendar was changed to align with the life of Christ. (BC = Before Christ; AD = Anno Domini -- Latin for "Year of our Lord.") Because of that day, the Christian church was born, representing 1/3 of the current global population on every part of the globe. (2010 statistics). And the Christian church, over the past 2000 years, is responsible for a rise in education, the arts, medicine and systems of justice. It can be argued that science has its roots in Christianity, many of its founders having been Christians, including Kepler, Boyle, Pascal, Pasteur and Newton. And it goes beyond the physical sciences. An overarching theme given to the world by Christianity is the equality of human beings, and the worth and value of every human life.

Now, it isn't my purpose today to compare the values of Christianity with other religions. I am aware, and grateful, for the contributions made by all people, regardless of their religious background. But I *am* making the claim that Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, has started a movement that changed the world. Because of the magnitude of that movement, it is worth our

while today to examine what made such a difference. And it boils down to what you don't see – on an empty cross, an empty tomb, and empty grave clothes. Empty – yet full of promise.

Let's take a walk with the women who got up early on that first Easter Sunday, to go to the tomb where Jesus' body was placed, just a few short days earlier. As they leave their homes inside the walls of Jerusalem, they pass through the gates to go out of town. On their way, they pass by a hill, on which 3 crosses had been erected, now empty. Jesus, their teacher, the one they called "Lord," had occupied one of those crosses. On the most terrible day of their lives, he had been wrongly accused, sentenced to die and hung on one of those crosses. There's no question that he died there. There was no faking a death on a cross; the Romans were far too thorough for that. In fact, no one in Jerusalem that day ever denied the death of Jesus.

Jesus died on the cross. Now it is empty. Empty of Jesus' body, but full of God's promise. And what it means for you and me today – is forgiveness. Now, sin is an unpopular word these days. But let's be honest; while it may be unpopular, it does describe a simple truth. Sin literally means "missing the mark." We have all missed the mark – none of us has met God's standard for truth or justice or mercy. All of us here today (myself included) have sinned. In the whole world, only one person has ever lived his life without sin – and that's Jesus. Everyone else has failed.

God's word tells it to us straight: *the wages of sin is death*. We deserve to die. Jesus did not. On the cross, he paid the penalty for our sins. The Bible says, "He was wounded for our transgressions." It also says, "By his stripes we are healed." My friends, this is really good news: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. So great is his love. There is nothing we can do to be worthy of such a gift. Jesus died that we may be forgiven, thus being made right with God. It's a total gift, offered to all takers.

No one else has ever done such a thing. No one else lived a sinless life; no one else was in a position to make it happen. Only Jesus. And on the cross Jesus said, "It is finished." The work of forgiveness is complete. In God's eyes, those who do take him up on his offer now look like Jesus to him: sinless. Forgiven. A huge burden is lifted from your shoulders. Guilt and shame – removed. That's the promise of the empty cross.

We continue our walk with the women. They go on to the tomb, wondering, as they walk, about the great stone that has been placed against the entrance. How will they move it? Historical and archeological evidence tells us that stone was probably a foot thick and 5-6 feet in diameter. Running across the opening, an inclined groove or track was cut into the rock, with a deeper indentation at the tomb's entrance so that it settles in. It would have probably taken several strong men considerable effort to dislodge the stone and roll it back up the incline. In addition, Roman guards had been placed outside the tomb.

So what could a few women do? Imagine their astonishment to find the stone rolled away, the guards shaking in their boots and an angel sitting on top of the stone. *And the tomb was empty*. It was not what they expected to see. The body was gone. The empty tomb was mute evidence

that Jesus had risen – just as he had told them. But they were so surprised that they could not yet wrap their minds around it.

So the angel explained. "He is not here. He has been raised, just as he has said. Come and see." *He is not here.* What counts is what you *don't* see. The tomb was empty. And, like the clip you saw at the beginning of worship today, that is still really good news. Jesus is not dead! Death could not hold the Author of life. And here's more good news: death holds no terror for his followers, because they (and all who believe) will rise again to eternal life.

The story is told of a man whose son was deathly allergic to bee stings -- a single sting could kill him. One day he was horrified to see a bee land on his son's cheek. On impulse, he waved the bee away – at which point the bee settled on the father's arm and stung *him*. Then the bee returned to the boy. But now the father had no fear. The bee had lost its sting; it was rendered harmless. And his son was safe.

That's what the empty tomb means for you and me. The sting of death is removed! The 23rd Psalm says this, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall *fear* no evil." Will each of us here, someday die? Of course. But now -- there is nothing to fear. The grave no longer has the last word. Although death still roams the earth, it is now a defeated enemy; the power of its sting – the power to hold us eternally – has been rendered harmless. This is the promise of the empty tomb.

Let's walk with the women one last leg of their journey on that Easter morning so long ago. In their joy and amazement, after seeing the empty tomb and hearing the angel's message, they ran back to tell the disciples. On the way they met Jesus himself. He was no ghost. He was real and tangible. They could hear him, see him, touch him. He repeated the angel's promise. Later, two of those disciples, Peter and John, went to the tomb to check it out for themselves. It was just as the women had said. The tomb was empty.

But they took the next step; they entered the tomb for a closer look. Not only was the tomb empty, but the grave clothes were empty too. Now you need to know that this was probably not a shroud -- a single piece of cloth. Rather, they were likely strips of linen, used to bind the body -- like a mummy (like Lazarus). It was proof that his body had not been stolen, a rumor spread by Jewish and Roman leaders. Who would bother to remove the binding that wrapped it? If the disciples had stolen the body (as the rumor went), it would have been easier to move if it were still wrapped. No, that particular theory never held water. First, no one every produced a body. Second, the disciples were afraid and in hiding. Third, after the resurrection they changed completely: all risked their lives to spread the Good News – hardly the behavior of cowards who lived a lie. No, the empty grave clothes gave further proof that Jesus was indeed alive.

What gave those disciples such extraordinary courage and conviction? Renewed relationship with the living Jesus. The biblical record indicates that Jesus appeared first to the women, then to Simon Peter, then (on Easter evening) to two men walking to a town outside of Jerusalem, then to all of his disciples. Over a 40-day period, Jesus repeatedly appeared to up to 500 different people, all of whom were witnesses to his resurrection. Jesus was alive. Here's the

point: he is not *there*; he is *here*, with his followers. No longer bound, he was free to be in renewed relationship with them. He sat, walked, talked and ate with them. Once again, they were together. The promise of the empty clothes is this: Jesus will have a relationship with you, as well. It's a promise that involves faith.

The Bible says, *Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*. It takes faith to "see" what is unseen.

The witness of the Christian community, beginning that day 2000 years ago and ever since, is that Jesus is here with us today. We believe in a risen and living Lord. We talk to him daily in prayer. Jesus says to each and every one of us, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." I love that image: sharing a meal with Jesus. It's an image that evokes a daily relationship with a close friend. And that's the invitation he gives to everyone here today.

Some of you remember when John F. Kennedy was in the White House. He had a very young family at the time; his son, John Jr, was a toddler. If you or I – or a member of Congress or anyone else – needed to see the president, we would have to make an appointment. We would need to go through strict security. But not the president's little boy. He could just run into his father's office, play on his desk or sit in his lap, any time. Because John Jr had a special relationship with his dad.

That's how it is for us, too. God, our Father, wants to be in life-long relationship with you. It makes a difference, when you can go to God in prayer – at any moment, in any place. It makes a difference, when you can give your worries and doubts and fears to him – because he knows the bigger picture. It makes a difference, when your loved one is laid to rest, knowing that you will see that person again. It makes a difference, when you come to the end of your own life, knowing that the grave is not a dead end. It's just a door to the next chapter of life, one that will never end.

Jesus is alive; he is risen! The empty cross, the empty tomb, the empty grave clothes are evidence of things not seen: forgiveness, eternal life, a relationship here and now with Jesus. Sometimes it's what you *don't see* that counts. Jesus' resurrection has changed the world. And he can change your life.