

The Tomb – Empty or Full!

The sermon given by Rev Eddie Sykes
at the joint communion service to celebrate Easter on 17 April 2022
The Gospel reading was Luke 24:1–12



If I was to give this sermon title, I think it would be: The Tomb: Empty or Full!

Like me you may have heard several Easter sermons entitled – quite simply – “The Empty Tomb”.

That idea comes, quite rightly, from the stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb, and the body of Jesus absent.

This picture has come to symbolize the Resurrection – Jesus is not here, he has risen – this is what Easter is all about.

But let’s stop for a moment.

The first persons to reach Jesus’ tomb on that first Easter morning were some women, including Mary Magdalene, Jesus’ mother Mary, and Joanna. As they approached the tomb and saw the stone placed across the entrance had been removed – they went in – empty!

They were not as excited and hopeful at the idea of the empty tomb as we are. Now they weren’t even able to care for Jesus’ body – as was the custom.

Then the two men, gleaming in light, ask: “Why are you looking for the living where you would expect to find the dead?” He isn’t here but he has been raised.

Remember his teaching – this is what he was talking about – and the women remembered, and their demeanour has turned from confusion to ‘wow’!

So they tell the others, who think the fragrance of their spices has muddled their minds – all except for Peter, who hurtles off to the tomb – sees only a linen cloth, and as he returns is in deep wondering.

Yes, the empty tomb is hope for all who believe, and it has become a wonderful symbol of the Resurrection – but if all Easter is about is an empty tomb, then surely the whole event would have been forgotten years ago.

Have you ever thought – perhaps Jesus in breaking the power of death could actually be seen as filling the tomb?

When you look at a tomb – doesn’t it seem to you like the ultimate expression of emptiness?

But Easter brings good news – and since Easter the tomb has been full.





1. Victory

Charles Wesley proclaims this in the hymn where he states:

Where, O death, is now thy sting?
Where's the victory, boasting grave?

Our Lord has taken conquest of the grave, turning its emptiness into a place where victory now dwells.

No longer is the grave the ultimate winner.

When we do indeed die, we now have that sublime confidence that we will rise again.

2. Hope

The tomb is also full of hope.

My first appointment as a presbyter was in the Morpeth Circuit in the NE of England as minister of two chapels in former mining villages.

Folks in those parts were either church (CofE) or chapel (Methodist). In the five years I served there I presided at some 250 funerals.

When you are faced with that many funerals, and you say those words of committal so many times, if I didn't have this Christian hope, I don't think I would be able to function at such rites and services.

Although I am familiar with conducting these services, I too at times find myself weeping with the mourners, as I too felt their loss – but to be honest, although my tears are those of sadness – they are not of despair, because I believe that the tomb is a place full of hope.

As I have listened on several occasions to the last words of a person before they expire, I have heard many words of hope and trust. Words spoken by the one dying and by the one to be bereaved.

This reminds me of the diligent tourist who spotted the inscription over the Archives building which read: "What is past is prologue."

"What does that mean?" he asked the young tour-guide. She replied brightly, "*It means you ain't seen nothing yet!*"

People of faith have hope because in one sense, *'they ain't seen nothing yet!'* There is now something new and wondrous – hope eternal.

3 Hell's despair

The preacher, Ellsworth Kalas highlighted this point to me, when he writes that the tomb is full of hell's despair. Note I am not saying *human* despair, but *hell's* despair.

Hell has many guises – fear, hate, dread, and despair – and the tomb is about hell itself being filled with despair.

If you live in Ukraine, Yemen or other conflict zones you know what hell is.

If you are a refugee seeking a peaceful place that can be called home – you know what hell is, especially if it means the possibility of then being carted off to another country.

There are many for whom the recent rise in the cost of living will be hellish.

In other words, praise God, the good news is that hell has lost – it is up to us who follow Christ to show it.

So, the empty tomb could be described as full – full of hope, victory, gladness, anticipation.

We could also say that the tomb is full of all the saints and martyrs – literally all those witnesses of Christ who have gone before us.





It has often been said that it is the 'blood of the martyrs', beginning with that ragtag bunch of fishermen, small businessmen, labourers and others, that is the seed of the church.

Read or listen again to the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr – one who knew that his stance had created enemies, yet who knew a fullness far greater than any of those who opposed him.

He knew the victory, he knew hope.

And when you think about it – now that death is banished – there is room in the tomb for all that is good and hopeful.

When despair, hopelessness, loneliness, frustration, meaninglessness and dread are taken from the tomb there is all the room in eternity for life in all its fullness.

One of things that happens quite often in conversation with those who are bereaved, is that I hear them talking of their future plans that never quite materialized.

I felt sorry for my mum by the fact that she and dad (who died in 1981) would not know life after all of us four children had left home.

Indeed, death can crowd out some of our loveliest expectations.

Yet, if it wasn't for Easter, then **all** we would have would be our unfulfilled dreams.

But, because of Easter – with that sense of emptiness gone – we have hope beyond the grave.

That empty tomb in that distant Holy Land some 2,000 years ago is way too small to hold the fullness of hope that now exists.

For that empty tomb has filled millions and millions of human lives throughout the centuries.

So today, from a different angle I want you to look at the tomb as one that is full.

For didn't the Lord Jesus himself say, "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly".

This Easter, and beyond, may the fullness of the Resurrection infect us with victory, hope and joy.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Amen.