

The Glory of Nothing
John 20:1-9

[1] Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. [2] So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." [3] So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. [4] Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. [5] And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. [6] Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, [7] and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. [8] Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; [9] for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. (ESV)

Everything has its day. Firecrackers on the Fourth of July. Father on Father's Day. Mothers on Mother's Day. Turkey on Thanksgiving. Flags have their day. Trees have theirs. Veterans deserve one. Groundhogs get one. Even ashes have Ash Wednesday. Palms just had theirs last Sunday. Today, though, is the most unusual day of all days. We are gathered here today to give praise, honor, and glory to God for NOTHING. We are in the house of God this morning because there was NOTHING in the tomb – literally NO BODY in the tomb that first Easter morning.

Some working people think that Easter gets the short end of all the holidays. Workers get OFF for Christmas and Thanksgiving, and for Independence Day, of course. Some people even get their birthdays off. But Easter is a Sunday, and doesn't get observed with a Monday holiday. It's a moveable festival determined by moon phases. Does it seem that Easter has a pretty lousy press agent? I've seen the line for children to take their picture with the Easter Bunny at the mall, and frankly, the line is pretty short. Is it perhaps because so many people have nothing to celebrate?

People are not known to pack churches during Lent, and even on Good Friday, there are plenty of seats available. Yet churches are filled on Easter. Why? There is a little different atmosphere on Easter morning, compared with Good Friday. Good Friday was not a cheery day for somber Christians. On Friday, believers make a virtual visit to the cross on Skull Hill, and see Jesus, suffering, and bleeding, and finally dying for sins. He was having a very rough time of it. It was no fun to be there. It's no surprise that people are not so anxious to sit at the foot of the cross, and watch the Savior suffer the agony of hell, when they know that their sins put him up there. Many Christians would just as soon Jesus go through all the suffering without them, knowing that it was their sins that added to his load.

We said a moment ago that we are here because there was nothing – no body – in the grave where Jesus had been laid. If that's true, then something tremendous happened some 2000 years ago. The lifeless body of Jesus had been taken down from the cross, wrapped in a burial shroud, and laid to rest in a new tomb before sundown Friday. If it's Sunday morning, and he's not there anymore, then something extraordinary must have happened.

What happened can be summarized quickly. There was extra security, a big commotion, followed by plenty of confusion. Already back on Friday there were guards and seals, torches and swords, soldiers and campfires, officers and orders. There was also a lot of Jewish suspicion and speculation. The Jews, who read the Scriptures, knew that there were clear prophecies about the Messiah being raised from the dead. Most of the Jews were certain that Jesus was not the promised Messiah. They were going to make certain that the followers of Jesus would not pull any cheap publicity stunt by swiping the body and then proclaiming that Jesus rose from the dead.

Everything was quiet on Saturday. It was the Sabbath, from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. Good Jews went to the temple or to their local synagogue, as usual. But early Sunday morning came the big commotion. Guards and seals and torches and swords and fires and soldiers and officers and orders all made way for the power of the almighty God.

It wasn't much of a contest. The poor Roman guards never knew what hit them. When they finally cleared their heads and ran back to headquarters, reporting to their commanding officer, they got the Roman equivalent of the UFO routine: now fellas, get a grip, take it easy, and don't repeat this story to anyone else, 'cause they'll think you're crazy!

Meanwhile, back at the tomb, everything is peaceful and quiet. Things are ready for the first visitors. Note that it is Mary who gets there first. Women of God have so often been dedicated, ready and willing to do the work that is needed. And while Mary gets there first, she also makes the first wrong conclusion: body snatcher! Mary thinks to herself: "Here I get up early to serve Jesus, to honor him with the burial spices, and somebody has to be so heartless and disrespectful -- by stealing the body! Is nothing sacred? She scurries away.

Next, in order, come John and Peter, and they do no better than Mary in sorting things out. This is really amazing to us, because we've had the benefit of knowing this whole story from the Gospel writers. But that morning, even these men, these disciples of Jesus, personally trained, personally tutored by Jesus for three years, didn't make the connection between the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus. They heard that the tomb was empty, but they were not certain how it got that way.

Verse 9: for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Jesus -- the best Rabbi, the perfect teacher, the only Son of God, was not able to make this point perfectly clear to imperfect students who are either distracted or have memories that are way too short!

The hand-picked disciples of Jesus did not understand the Scriptures -- that Jesus MUST rise from the dead. Why did he have to? He did not have to rise from the dead to finish paying for sins. He had finished that on Friday, and said so in exactly so many words: "It is finished." He made the final payment on the cross, with his blood. There was no doubt in the minds of those who saw him hanging there that he was paying, holding nothing back. He was paying for the sins of people, and not just the sins of the people who were

watching nearby, but paying for the sins of the whole world -- every man, woman, and child who has ever lived. He must, finally, rise from the dead, and he does it to complete God's plan of salvation, and to provide all the essential proof that Jesus Christ is the Savior that every person needs.

Here's the first proof -- The fact that Jesus rose from the dead is clear and certain proof that the one known as Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. Why raise someone from peaceful sleep unless he has something significant still to be done beyond the grave? He is King eternal. His job doesn't end with a criminal execution. He predicted and prophesied that he would rise from the dead. He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (John 2:19 ESV)

His prophecies have proven to be true, even this most difficult and spectacular proof. This is not a magic trick or a shell game. This is not an optical illusion or a card up your sleeve. His resurrection proves that he IS who he said he was -- the Son of God from eternity. What he spoke and taught not only sounded true, but turned out to be true. Nothing to correct. Nothing to change. Nothing to be sorry for. If he can pull off a resurrection from the dead, anything else he says or promises, you can take to the bank.

Now the second proof -- the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead proves that God is satisfied with all that he had done. His suffering and death paid the price, once and for all, for all the sinning that we or anyone else can cram into one short life time. As the Father raises the Son from the dead, the Father gets out his huge rubber stamp, grabs your sin accounting sheet, and convincingly stamps it PAID IN FULL.

And the final proof -- The fact that Jesus rose from the dead proves that he can do it also to me. I have no intention of being buried in some hole in the ground for eternity while there's such a place as heaven. I want to be there. I have driven past some beautiful cemeteries, but as beautiful as they are, I wouldn't want to stay there forever! When Jesus comes visibly for the second and final time, this earth will come to an end. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. All the graves will be opened -- believers first, then unbelievers. The earth

will be destroyed, but not the human bodies which God created. They were designed to live eternally, and they all would live eternally in heaven, had it not been for sin and its lousy wages – death. I smile when I think of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because I know how triumphant and glorious his resurrection was, and mine will be, too – and yours too! Jesus is the first fruit.

We started this morning talking about nothing. The Apostle Paul has his brief commentary on nothing. He wrote to the Corinthians:

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17 ESV)

Without the resurrection of Jesus, your faith, and mine, are nothing. Our faith is futile. Our faith is just a lot of hot air. If you cannot point to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have nothing to live for or hope for.

If Jesus were still in the grave, would people from all over the world flock to Israel, and stand in line for hours to see his body? I am absolutely positive they would NOT. If Jesus were still in the grave, there would be no reason to consider him to be anything truly special or unique. There would be no reason to think that he was the only Son of God. There would be no reason for this world to pay any attention to him at all.

If you do take a trip or tour to Israel, you will find that people don't know for certain exactly where Jesus' borrowed grave once was. Oh, there's a traditional site. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built over it, and it makes it hard to prove any scholar's theory about the exact location. For the sake of the tourists, there is a lovely garden setting, not far away from the traditional historic sight, complete with an old-fashioned rolling tombstone, just as the Gospels describe it.

But in the final analysis, it doesn't make a particle of difference where the tomb was, because Jesus is not there. We CELEBRATE the fact that he's NOT there. We celebrate the "nothing" – a body not there! We don't get a day off one day a year to celebrate that fact. We use EVERY Sunday to

celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. For believers, other holidays don't even rank close – they're not in the same ball park. No other day deserves it. Every Sunday is a little Easter, and today is Big Easter!

After the saving work of Jesus had been completed, after the law of God had been perfectly fulfilled, Christians immediately concluded that they no longer were required to worship on the Sabbath day – on Saturday. But more than ever, they wanted to meet together for worship and praise of their resurrected Lord and King. What day should it be? It was a no-brainer. They were free to worship on any day of the week, but they would make a habit of worshipping on Sunday, the first day of the week. They would make Sunday the Lord's day, because it was resurrection day – the day that makes all the difference, for time and for eternity.

I cannot explain the scientific or unscientific evidence for or against physical resurrection. I cannot convince you that something actually happened some 2,000 years ago half way around the world, and that it should mean something special to you. That's the job of the Holy Spirit. I can't force you to dig through the Bible and figure it out for yourself. I CAN tell you that Christ is risen, and that there is reason to celebrate.

There is no better news to know or share than a resurrected and living Lord. Christians all over the globe are greeting each other today with special words. They are our words. We are resurrection people. It's who we are name. It's our brand. It's our hope. It's our promise. So let's say it again: Christ is risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

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April 16, 2017
North Highlands, California