

You expect rush hour traffic around Orlando at 7:30 A.M. weekdays. You expect to find hamburgers at McDonalds. You expect spring to follow winter. You came to church this morning expecting to smell Easter lilies. And you do. You expected to hear some special music. And you have. No surprises here. But there are also those times when things aren't what you would expect. I expected the Michigan State Spartan basketball team to be in the finals for March Madness. They lost in their first game. I expected that my grandson at 4 ½ months of age would be sleeping through the night. But the little tyke keeps mommy and daddy awake regularly during the early morning hours. I might expect when I attend church in Michigan while on vacation, it would be just be another church service. Suddenly a single sentence from a sermon or the turn of phrase from a hymn verse hit out of nowhere and my eyes begin to tear up.

Easter is one of those things we just weren't expecting, but it is exactly what we need! My Easter encouragement to you this morning is let's get ready to be pleasantly surprised. Today is a Day when things turned out: "Much Better Than Expected"!

We walk with three individuals to the tomb this morning: Mary Magdalene and two of the disciples, Peter and John. Mary was the first to arrive. Previously, on the late afternoon of Good Friday, just before the Sabbath began, Mary and the other women who had followed Jesus watched where He was buried so that they could return and pay their respects with a proper burial. It was for this reason they were on this road to the tomb early Sunday morning; it was the first chance they could do so after their Sabbath rest. To be certain, it was not a joyful trip for Mary. There was no skip in her step, no whistle on her lips. Only grief and sorrow in her heart. Her Lord was dead. As she plodded to the cemetery early that morning, her sorrow was compounded by the fact that she didn't even know if it would be possible for her to pay her respects because the group of women wouldn't be able to budge the stone that covered the tomb. And just when it seemed things could get no worse, they did. When Mary arrived at the tomb, Jesus' body was gone. For Mary, this added insult to injury. It poured salt into her emotional wounds. Hear her grieving voice report the sorrowful news to Peter and John: **"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him."** Flooded with grief and sorrow, all Mary could do was sit outside the tomb and flood the earth with hertears.

What about us? Are we crying as we come to the tomb today? Do grief and sorrow reside in our hearts? If we're honest, we have to admit there's a little bit of Mary in all of us today. Don't holidays stir up that grief and sorrow we felt as we laid loved ones in a grave and walked away with an overwhelming sense of loss? Aren't there people here who have felt things in their lives go from bad to worse? Haven't we at times had our dreams destroyed and our hopes dashed? Haven't we had the joy sucked right out of us at times? Our trip to the tomb today, like Mary's, has grief and sorrow.

Mary wasn't the only one who traveled to the tomb that Sunday. After hearing Mary's report, Peter and John also headed there. While they too were filled with grief and sorrow, other emotions filled their hearts as well. First of all, Peter. Personally, I believe Peter took Jesus' death harder than anyone else. Not only did he have to deal with the grief and sorrow of losing a mentor and close friend, he had the millstone of guilt and shame hung around his neck. He had left his Savior's side after promising allegiance to the point of death. He buckled under the pressure of a servant girl's needling and denied knowing the One who knew him so well. Imagine the knife in Peter's heart when he heard the rooster crow and was on the receiving end of Jesus' disappointed glance. Peter went to the tomb with guilt and shame.

Is it any different for us? Maybe this is the first time we've worshiped in months and we're feeling guilty about our irregular worship life. Or, like Peter, we say one thing about our loyalty to Jesus with our lips and say something completely different with our lives. We lie awake at night because we know we could be better parents, better spouses, better workers, better church members, better pastors. We done some awful things in our past that are hidden in our personal guilt closet. Our trip to church on Sunday is often traveled with our eyes fixed on the rearview mirror, looking at the cross of Friday that shouts, "Your sins did this." Like Peter, our trip to the tomb is accompanied by guilt and shame.

What about John? How did he come to the tomb? With grief and sorrow? Certainly. With guilt and shame? I suppose—he too had fallen asleep while Jesus prayed in agony. He too had deserted Jesus in the garden. But humanly speaking, he could soothe his conscience by the fact that he had been with Jesus before the high priest and had consoled Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross. What sticks out about John is his guarded skepticism. Elsewhere we're told that the disciples did not believe the women's report. It was "nonsense" to them that Jesus had risen.

Are we guarded skeptics when it comes to believing in Jesus and all he's done? Have you ever found yourself saying, "I want to believe. I just don't know if I can? There are so many renditions out there, how do I know this is the truth? Maybe Jesus simply passed out on the cross, then later revived and escaped. Maybe his followers did steal the body and spread the story that he was alive. Maybe all this is a legend that developed years later. I never saw anyone rise from the dead—is it reasonable to believe this is true?" I will be the first to admit that throughout my life, Satan has worked on me as he's worked on you. At times, my trip—our trip—to the tomb has been made with guarded skepticism, just like John's.

But like John, it's not important how we come to the tomb but how we leave the tomb, the *empty* tomb. The empty tomb has life-changing power. We leave much better than we expected to leave the tomb.

Look what it did for John. After John went inside the tomb and saw the burial cloths arranged as they were, neatly folded. John himself reported, **“He saw and believed”** (20:8). The empty tomb converted John’s guarded skepticism into guaranteed certainty. And it does the same for us. The empty tomb proves Jesus is the one he claimed to be. The empty tomb and subsequent appearances to hundreds of witnesses guarantee that Jesus was not just a popular religious leader but was and is the Son of God. Only God has such power over death. Thus John writes a few verses later, **“These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God”** (20:31). The empty tomb leads us to stop doubting and believe. The empty tomb allows us to walk away with a faith that’s not limping on guarded skepticism but is established on guaranteed certainty.

The life-changing power of the empty tomb doesn’t stop there. The empty tomb looks at our guilt and shame and applies grace and comfort. Go back to Peter. We considered how heavy that burden of guilt must have been on his shoulders. But God used the empty tomb to comfortingly address Peter’s guilt. First of all, listen to the message God’s angel had for the women who had stuck around at the tomb while Mary ran off to tell the disciples. Mark’s Gospel records that, after reporting to them that Jesus was alive, the angel instructed, **“Go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee’”** (16:7). Later on, Jesus personally would apply his grace and comfort to Peter by reinstating him as His disciple. How awesome! In Peter, here’s a guy who turned his back on Jesus more than once, yet Jesus went out of his way to say, “I forgive you. Your guilt is gone.” That’s why Peter could later write, **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”** (1 Peter 1:3). The empty tomb gives us that same “new birth.” The empty tomb gives us a living hope. The Bible says that Jesus **“was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification”** (Romans 4:25). The empty tomb declares us to be justified, not guilty, innocent. The empty tomb guarantees that our sins are forgiven and forgotten. What grace! What comfort! Think of what that specifically means for you and for me. That means that although we stumbled to the empty tomb with guilt and shame yoked over our backs this morning—guilt over our sporadic worship, shame over our frequent denials of Christ and failures to stand up for others—we can leave here, we can leave the empty tomb, without guilt and shame. Jesus has forgiven you. The empty tomb gives us grace and comfort.

Doesn’t that make you exceedingly glad? Doesn’t that make you want to celebrate? That’s another life-changing power of the empty tomb: It turns our grief and sorrow into gladness and celebration. Look what it did for Mary. She came to the tomb full of sorrow. She lingered at the tomb crying, believing her Lord was stolen. But when Jesus appeared to her, thus proving that the tomb was empty because he had risen, her tears of sorrow turned into tears of joy. **“Teacher,”** she cried, as she grabbed onto his feet. Only

after the Lord instructed her did she let go. Then she went to the disciples, celebrating the good news, **“I have seen the Lord!”** (John 20:18). What’s better yet is that her grief and sorrow lasted only about 40 hours, but her gladness and celebration would last an eternity. For what does the empty tomb prove? It validates Jesus’ promise, **“Because I live, you also will live”** (John 14:19). The empty tomb guarantees that we can walk away from this life of grief and sorrow into a new life where there are no more tears, no more pain, no more sorrow. And when we realize this big picture, it sure changes our perspective on the griefs and sorrows we brought to the tomb today. We realize they’re only temporary.

Every year thousands of people climb a mountain in the Italian Alps, passing the “stations of the cross” to stand at an outdoor crucifix. One tourist noticed a little trail that led beyond the cross. He fought through the rough thicket and, to his surprise, came upon another shrine, a shrine that symbolized the empty tomb. It was neglected. The brush had grown up around it. Almost everyone had gone as far as the cross, but there they stopped.

My friends, far too many have gotten only to the cross and have known the despair and the heartbreak. For, if viewed by itself, the cross is simply a reminder of the seriousness of our sin. Sin causes death. Far too few have moved beyond the cross to find the real message of Easter, the message of the empty tomb. Because Jesus walked away from His tomb, someday we’ll walk away from ours. No more despair. No more heartbreak. Only joy. That’s much better than I ever expected leaving a gravesite. That’s some life-changing power! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen!