

## Empty Cemeteries

Isaiah 25:6-9

Mark 16:1-8

Did you notice how specific Mark is about when the women go to the tomb? *“When the Sabbath was over...Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise.”* Mark is a word economist – every word carries meaning in this gospel, so the question becomes, why is Mark so specific about exactly when the women visit the tomb? What is Mark saying theologically in this very precise description of the moment the women enter the tomb?

I think Mark is remembering another garden all the way back at the beginning of time: the Garden of Eden. A garden that took six days to create. A garden that came crashing down around the people who lived in it so that, as beautiful as it had been, it became a garden where sin and death entered and stayed.

It is Sunday, a new first day of a new week...notice how Mark underlines this: *“When the Sabbath was over...on the first day of the week...”* This is the beginning of a new creation, in a new garden. See? Mark is “marking” a new age, a new creation. This is a new day – not just a new day of the week, but a new day in a new world. This is a new Genesis, a new beginning, and in this new world, the power of sin and the power of death have been broken...and the first sign is an empty tomb.

The women who come to the tomb do not yet know of this new world to which they have awakened. For them, it is just another day in the old world...worse than that, really. It is the day they kiss goodbye any hope of a new day. Their hopes were riding on Jesus. His miracles, his wisdom, his love, his way of putting down the high-and-mighty and lifting up the down-and-out, everything about him gave them hope that if anyone could change the world, he could; if anyone could overcome wrong and make the world right, he could.

But he could not. Wrong overcame right, evil overcame good, despair overcame hope. The man their hopes were riding on was dead, and they had come to the tomb to acknowledge defeat, to give the devil his due, to put burial spices on the dead body of the one they thought would bring life.

It is just another day in a world where might makes right, money talks, where little people are there to be manipulated by bigger people. And then you die. It all seems to be summed up in the question they ask each other, *“Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”* When your hope is gone, you ask questions like that – mechanical questions. “How do I make it through the day” questions, because, when your hope is gone, just making it through another day feels like a constant process of rolling stones out of the way.

And when your hope is gone, you have a hard time holding your head up. It is easier just to look down at the ground in front of your feet. The problem is that you miss the signs of a new day until they smack you right in the forehead. *“When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.”* This is unexpected! How did this happen? What could it mean? More evil? Has someone stolen the body now, too?

They enter the tomb, confused and anxious, and find a young man dressed in white, an angel, obviously, because their confusion and anxiety become alarm and panic. *“Do not be alarmed,”* he says. *“You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.”* You can almost see the wide-eyed, slack-jawed faces of the women all turning in unison and looking at the empty spot where his body had been, then turning back to the angel as he says, *“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”*

The women do not do what they are told. Instead, their bodies start trembling, they turn and leave the tomb, then they run for their lives...or, at least run for their sanity, because as bad as the old creation was, at least they understood it. How would *you* make sense of an empty tomb?

The only way it makes any sense is to understand that it is a new day, a new world, a new creation, a new garden. No doubt, the snakes are still around, but they don't have the power they used to; and now it is angels who meet us, instead of a snake, to tell us the most amazing news we have ever heard: Jesus is risen! The final resting place is no longer final! The tomb is empty, and from now on, all who follow him live in this new world where death is a victory, not a defeat; a beginning, not an end; and all the stones that cover all the tombs in our lives have been rolled away, and everything we've buried

deep inside, everything we've given up hoping for, everything dead inside of us has been emptied, resurrected, brought back to life.

If you think about it, there is a cemetery in every one of our lives. Just like every town, no matter how small it is, has at least one cemetery, every one of our lives has a cemetery where we bury parts of ourselves. In the cemetery of your life you will find buried all of your sins; all of those times in the past that you now look back on with shame and embarrassment. The times you said terrible things to someone you loved and saw the crushing hurt in their eyes. The times you joined in making fun of someone who thought you were their friend, and saw the light go out in their eyes. The times you broke God's law in a major way and you continue to feel the guilt.

In this cemetery are also buried all of your regrets for the things you wish you had done but didn't. The relationships you never took the step to heal, the good deeds left undone, the chances to help that you walked away from.

In this cemetery you will find the gravestones marking all the times you could have been more than you were, could have done better than you did, but it was easier not to, and now you look back and wonder how life would have been different if you would have put a little more effort into it, or had a different set of priorities.

In this cemetery, too, are all the painful times, all the hurts you have buried deep inside. The times you really wanted to hear your parents tell you they loved and believed in you, and all you heard was how messy your room was and how low your grades were. The times you tried to tell your kids how much you loved them, and they thought you were being silly and didn't want to hear it. The times you opened your heart to someone and they broke it and walked away. The times when you trusted someone and they took advantage of you. The times when you were left out and left behind and you wondered if there was anything about you that was worth anything to anyone. Most of that stuff just gets buried out back in the cemetery of our lives, without so much as a marker to say what lies buried there.

And right in the middle of that cemetery is a gravestone with your name on it, and the date of your birth with a dash after it, and a blank space waiting to be filled in with the date of your death.

We all have these cemeteries, and the longer we live, the bigger they get. We bury things there daily, little mental funeral processions going on in the back of our consciousness.

But it is a Sunday morning, *the first day of the week*, the beginning of a new day. But, not just a new day, it is a New Day, a new Age, a new Creation, a new Beginning. Walk out into the cemetery in your life and when you look up you will see something amazing! All the stones have been rolled away! All the graves have been emptied! All of your sins have disappeared, all of your failures have been erased, all of your hurts have the power to be healed, and even your own death, your own grave is empty – not because you haven't yet died, but because you never will die... you never will cease to exist, for your death has been transformed into the beginning of real living, true life!

What does this mean? It means we are free – free from the past and all the ways it holds us down, defines us, binds us; and free from the future, free from the power death has to control us, scare us. We are free to live today to the fullest.

Often, when we go to the grave following a funeral, I remind those who have gathered for the burial not to come to that grave to find the person who has died. I remind them of the angel's words on Easter morning: *"he has risen! He is not here."* The same is true for you in your own life, in your own mental cemetery. There is no need to sit by the graves of your sins, your failures, your pains, and your mortality. Those graves are empty! There is nothing there! This is a new day, your life has a new beginning, and you are free to be a new creation because Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Praise God! Amen and amen!