



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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The Lord's Day  
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*Easter Sunday*

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**“Meeting the Risen Lord”**  
**John 20:1-18**

This morning we celebrate an empty tomb. But the empty tomb doesn't really *prove* anything!

Many things can explain an empty tomb.

Grave robbers, for instance. They were not uncommon in Jesus' day. Since the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea, along with Nicodemus, had taken Jesus' body and prepared him for burial with about seventy-five pounds of spices, grave robbers might have thought this newly cut garden tomb was a good target. So somebody could have said that was what happened.

An elaborate plot to fake a resurrection could be another explanation. In fact, Matthew's Gospel (28:11-15) tells us that the Jewish leaders concocted just such a story—that his disciples came at night and stole his body so they could say he had risen. Never mind that there were several Roman soldiers guarding the tomb! This story or some variation of it has been repeated time and again by a variety of skeptics through the ages.

At first, Mary Magdalene thought that it might have been that the gardener was so conscientious that he didn't want someone crucified as a criminal buried in his cemetery.

The tomb was empty, but why?

It was with Jesus' followers then as it probably would have been with us—the empty tomb proved nothing!

Only the beloved disciple believed at the sight of the empty tomb; actually, his faith was confirmed by the fact that Jesus' grave clothes were left a certain way. Grave robbers don't bother to unwrap bodies, nor do they leave the linen behind! And if someone had unwrapped the body, wouldn't the napkin for the head be with the other grave clothes rather than still wrapped in a place by itself?

***What happened that morning . . .***

John's account of the events that morning is a bit different from that of the other Gospel writers. Each of them differs from all the others in certain respects, but John's differs the most. Yet all four proclaim the same message: Christ has risen from the dead!

As John tells the story, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early, while it's still dark, and sees that the huge stone covering the entrance has been removed (20:1).

She runs and tells Simon Peter and the beloved disciple (apparently John), “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” (20:2).<sup>1</sup>

When they hear this, Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb, with the beloved disciple getting there first, but he doesn’t go in. When Peter gets there, he goes on in and sees the grave clothes. Then the beloved disciple goes in, and when he sees the grave clothes and how they are lying, he believes (20:3-9).

Then Peter and the beloved disciple go back home (20:10).

After they leave, Mary is weeping outside the tomb. She stoops to look in and sees two angels. They ask her, “Woman, why are you crying?” She replies, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him” (20:11-13).

And then she turns and sees a man standing there, but for some reason—maybe it’s the depth of her anguish—she doesn’t recognize that he is *Jesus*. He asks her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” She thinks he’s the gardener, so she says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him” (20:14-15).

And then something amazing happens. In John 10:27, Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice; and I know them, and they follow me.”<sup>2</sup> Now Jesus calls her by name, “Mary.” And *instantly* she recognizes him, and turns and says to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (20:16), which means “my Teacher.”

Somebody has observed that only a living shepherd can call his sheep by name. And that’s exactly what the risen Lord Jesus does here! And Mary hears him and knows his voice, and in her joy falls down before him and apparently tries to cling to him, since he says, “Do not hold on to me . . . . Go instead to my brothers and tell them . . . .” (20:17).

So Mary goes and announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” and gives them his message (20:18). She becomes the first evangelist, and since ancient times has often been referred to as “the apostle to the apostles.”

### ***A living encounter***

*Mary knew Jesus was alive because she met him as the risen Lord.*

Jesus would go on to show himself to ten of the remaining eleven disciples (Thomas wasn’t there at the time—as one elderly deacon in one church I served loved to say about Thomas, “See what you might miss when you’re not at prayer meeting!”). A week later he would appear again to all eleven of them.

For them, the *real evidence* that Jesus was alive was that they had *met him* after he rose! It wasn’t the empty tomb that convinced them, it was their encounter with him as he revealed himself to them after his resurrection! And he still reveals himself today! He doesn’t necessarily appear physically to us as he did to the first disciples, but we still meet him as our risen Lord in many ways.

One of those ways is *through the witness of the Scriptures*. The Old Testament told of his coming. The New Testament gives us the apostolic *eyewitness* accounts of our Lord’s life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection. In ways that just can’t be explained, we sometimes meet him in the written Word.

We also meet him *through the presence of the Holy Spirit* in our individual lives and in our life together as the church. The risen Christ dwells in and among his people through the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

<sup>2</sup> From the *English Standard Version*.

presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is always with us, but there are times when we experience the *felt presence* of the Spirit. And when we do, we meet the risen Lord!

The way people usually first meet the risen Lord is *through the witness of those who have already met him* and have had their lives transformed by him. As they share their story and the gospel story—the good news about Jesus—the Spirit works in the conversation to convict and draw people who don't yet know him. And in that experience, they meet the risen Jesus!

And we meet the Christ who lives again *through our own personal encounter with him* as he brings us to himself in grace. We believe on the basis of the witness of the Scriptures and of those who know him. As we *trust* him as he reveals himself through that witness, we *know* because we meet Him!

### ***How do I know?***

*We know Jesus is alive when we meet Him as the risen Lord.* We affirm this truth every time we sing the old gospel hymn:<sup>3</sup>

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today!  
He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way  
He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart!  
You ask me how I know He lives:  
He lives within my heart!

Have you met him? Really met him? Have you personally, powerfully been encountered by this risen Lord Jesus Christ? Has this encounter made a difference in your life?

If you've met him, rejoice! Celebrate! Christ has risen! He has risen indeed!

And if you haven't met him, come to him today— what better time could there be to experience new life in Christ than Easter?

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred H. Ackley (text and music), "He Lives" in *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship* (Word Music/Integrity Music, 1997), 368.