

## THE EMPTY TOMB MEANS VINDICATION

EASTER – March 31, 2024

Mark 16:1-8 & Corinthians 15:19-28

Dear Christian Friends:

Last year, actress Gwyneth Paltrow and optometrist Terry Sanderson went to trial over a ski accident. He sued for damages. Paltrow sued for defamation. The jury sided with Paltrow. A headline read “Gwyneth Paltrow gets *vindication* at ski collision trial.”

*Vindication* literally means “to be declared the winner.” That’s what Easter means. **THE EMPTY TOMB MEANS VINDICATION.**

So, who needed vindication? Who needed to be declared the winner? Well, Jesus did. At least it looked that way on Good Friday. On the cross Jesus *looked like* a loser. The Jewish leaders had put Jesus on trial. They declared Jesus guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death. Pontius Pilate handed down the sentence: death by crucifixion.

So, Jesus hung on the cross. Jesus was bleeding and dying. If he were God, as he claimed, couldn’t he escape? You would think so. But nothing happened. Jesus breathed his last. This made Jesus just like every other miserable wretch who had ever hung on a cross. A loser. So, it was over. And as the sun set that night, his faithful followers were drowning in a bitter sauce of sorrow.

Maybe you can relate with that sorrow at the death of a loved one. The funeral is over. Your friends and family have gone home. Darkness settles on the day and over your heart. It’s too quiet. You feel so alone. You pray, “Lord, I’m so lost. I’m so confused. Why? Why did this happen?”

The death of a loved one hollows you out. By the same token, your own death lurks in the background. Time is always running out. Our bodies are failing. Our minds are fading. Even for young people, the anxiety of lost time creeps into every major life question. “Do I have the right friends? Will I ever love someone who loves me? Will college ever be worth it? What am I going to do with the rest of my life? Do I have time to make up for past mistakes?”

And it does not matter how old you are. We all grow older; *shorter of breath and one day closer to death*. Against the backdrop of this brief life, not just our bad choices, but especially the regret of sinful choices---that regret increases exponentially. The unavoidable march of death magnifies every mistake. Sin, guilt, and frustration make us look, feel, and act like losers.

That may have been the case for the disciples of Jesus early on that first Easter. Of course, we do not know exactly what they were *thinking*. But Saint Mark tells us what the faithful women were *doing*. They saw how Jesus had been a loser. Jesus had lost his life. So, at dawn, they went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ corpse. This was one last act of love for Jesus. But when they got there, they saw the stone of the tomb rolled away. They saw a young man in a white robe. **“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. ‘You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.’”**

Wait. What? Sure, Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection. But still, the empty tomb overwhelmed them. It did not process. **“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.”** Thankfully, their bewilderment had a short lifespan. Later that day, Jesus appeared to them. He appeared to Peter, to the disciples heading to Emmaus, and to the Eleven behind locked doors. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven plus Thomas. Then he showed himself alive and glorious to five hundred believers at once. The good news was true. Jesus was alive. The tomb was empty. **VINDICATION!**

Paul explains the significance of this in 1 Corinthians. **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, *we are to be pitied more than all people.*** So, let’s say the body of Jesus stayed in the grave. Well, then, we must conclude he was just a fraud. Or let’s say Jesus did not come back to life. Well, then, his words of forgiveness carry zero authority. What if Jesus had stayed dead? Then a dark, meaningless death is our only fate. But none of that is true. Jesus is the trustworthy source of full forgiveness and eternal life in glory. Why can we be so sure? Paul tells us what the disciples discovered on Easter morning. **But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.**

Back to Good Friday. On the cross Jesus seemed to be a loser, a guilty loser. And, yes, Jesus did have guilt on the cross. But that guilt was not his. It was ours. The Bible says, **The Lord laid on [Jesus] the iniquity [guilt] of us all. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.** Jesus took the punishment for all our sins.—all of them—every single one of them. Then God raised Jesus from the dead. That’s God’s exclamation point on what Jesus said on the cross. Concerning his mission to wipe away all our sins and conquer death, Jesus said, **It is finished.** Vindication! Total, complete, and final victory! All sins are paid for—your sins, my sins, everyone’s sins.

So, Jesus forgives us. *And where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation.* Jesus’ resurrection is proof that we do have hope beyond this life. Paul calls Jesus the **“firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”** The firstfruits were a sign of the harvest to come. So, Jesus’ resurrection is the promise of the resurrection to come for you and me. Again, Paul says: **“Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”** By faith, we belong to Jesus. On Judgment Day Jesus will raise us from our grave just as he came out of his. Judgment Day will be our ultimate vindication.

But we do not have to wait for Judgment Day for the empty tomb to be our victory. Easter makes us winners here and now. Of course, we do not always look like winners. The world mocks us and rejects us for our faith in Christ. Fewer and

fewer Americans follow Jesus. Worship attendance has plummeted. Citizens are more and more secular. Even Christians say, “The church is dying.”

Is that possible? Can the Church be dying when it is the body of the risen Christ? Sure, individual congregations may die. Christians may fall away. But as long as Jesus lives, so does his Church. So, we really do not need approval, accolades, and endorsements from this sinful world. Christ’s victory over the grave proves us right. The empty tomb of Christ is the only vindication we need. So, **our faith is not futile. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.**

Yes, Easter: ***This Is The Feast Of Victory For Our God.*** It is our victory, too. Sure, temptation still torments us. The sinful world still harasses us. But we are on a triumphal march to glory. Along the way, the vindication of the empty tomb fills our mundane existence with eternal significance. By the power of the empty tomb, we love God. We worship and praise God. We worship God joyfully and frequently. We also love and serve our neighbors. We go out of our way to practice compassion, hospitality, and charity. We even give an extra bonus of kindness to those who hate us, betray us, and persecute us. Love. Pure love. This is how we testify to the truth of the empty tomb. Even more than that. Through our service to Jesus and to others—this is how Jesus testifies to the world the truth of his resurrection.

To paraphrase Saint Paul in I Corinthians 15:17, ***Christ has been raised. Your faith is not useless. You are no longer in your sins.*** Yes, we are winners because of Jesus. What is our victory? Sin is forgiven. Death is defeated. Jesus is Lord. So, Easter brings the victorious verdict: **VINDICATION.** Alleluia! Christ is risen... AMEN.