

## **“To See An Empty Tomb”**

Date: 1 April 2018  
Text: John 20:1-10  
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What can happen to a person who looks into the empty tomb of Jesus? A woman named Grace suffered from bone cancer in her spine. A couple of her vertebra became so weakened that they collapsed, and over time she lost 15 cm. in height. It's hard to imagine her limitations or pain. But she had a positive attitude regarding her disease and her life—an attitude she always attributed to God, with great gratitude. Somewhere in every conversation we had she would eventually quote Philippians 4, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have... I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” She always marvelled that her parents chose to call her “Grace”, for she believed she was the recipient of God's grace daily.

What can happen to a person who looks into the empty tomb of Jesus? Lorna was a person who had a gift for prayer. One day she told me, “I have prayed for you everyday since you became a minister.” Every day. She believes God answers prayer, and so she prays.

What can happen to a person who looks into the empty tomb of Jesus? In 1907 a middle-aged British nurse became the director of The Belgian School of Registered Nurses, near Brussels. By the time WW1 broke out her school had come to prominence in Belgium and its director was teaching not only nurses but doctors. When war was declared her clinic was turned into a Red Cross Hospital, and her Christian faith prompted her to insist among her staff that the needs of the injured must be their primary concern, regardless of the nationality of the soldier. And she stayed there, working tirelessly, despite being English under German occupation. To her, the protection, the concealment and the smuggling away of hunted men was just as much an act of Christian compassion as the tending of the wounded, and she was prepared to face the consequences. Over seven months she personally helped 200 allied soldiers escape from German-occupied Belgium. But her work was not to last. In July 1915 she was arrested by the Germans and tried for treason. On October 11, 1915 she told a chaplain, “Standing as I do in view of God and eternity I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.” She was magnanimous in the face of death and forgave her executioners. She died the following day. Her name was Edith Cavell. One of the highlights of Jasper National Park is a mountain named in her honour.

What can happen to a person who looks into the empty tomb of Jesus? I was sitting in my office one day, many years ago. That morning in my devotional time I had a powerful sense that God would be

with me in a special way that day. That conviction came for no apparent reason – an experience unlike anything else before or since. Later that morning Wendy was ushered into my office by her father. She was in her early 30's, and had struggled with drugs and alcohol all her life. Her parents had convinced her to go to re-hab, but the center would not admit her because she was high when she arrived. So her father brought her to me. I was way, way out of my depth. Over the next four hours she had the most dramatic conversion experience I have ever witnessed. She left my office, cleaned up, got into the program, got better. Since then she has been a counsellor in a rehab facility. Wendy gives all the credit to God for turning her life around. As do I, for my day began with that strange, unprovoked, intense awareness that God would be with me in a special way that day. And if ever I needed God's support, that was the day.

What can happen to a person who looks into the empty tomb of Jesus? I sat with Bruce on the last day of his life. And it had been such a full life! He had once sat in for Gene Krupa, replacing Krupa behind the drums at a concert when the jazz legend fell suddenly ill. In his career Bruce became the vice-president of a major U.S. manufacturer. In retirement he and his wife made five trips to third-world countries through "Canadian Executives Serving Overseas", volunteering his time to help factories improve production. But as I sat with him that day none of that mattered. He wasn't looking back. He was looking forward, and he was genuinely excited in the face of his own death. He believed what came next would be (as he said) "the most amazing ride." When I said my final good-bye, he smiled at me, shook his head and corrected me. And he said to me words which I have carried some 20 years since: "Peter, there are no good-bye's in the family of God."

What can happen to a person who looks into the empty tomb of Jesus? John had been an ordinary fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. One day Jesus invited John to drop his nets, to come and follow him, for he would make John one who fishes for people. And John followed. His relationship and devotion to his master was such that he is known in the Gospel as "the disciple Jesus loved." It seems that John may have been the only disciple to stand at the foot of the cross, and Jesus at that time entrusted the care of his mother Mary to John. John would have been as distraught as any of the disciples at Jesus' death, and perhaps more so. When Mary Magdalene came with the extraordinary news that Jesus' body was missing, John was among the first apostles to go to the tomb. And we read this morning, that when he went into tomb, that he "saw and believed". He believed Mary's story that Jesus had risen from the grave. And soon he would see the same with his own eyes. And that belief changed him.

Just as that same belief changed the people in my stories. Coming to believe that Jesus is God's Son, risen from death, turned Wendy's life around completely. Believing in the risen Christ helped Grace turn to God for the strength and comfort she needed to face her terrible illness.. Believing in the risen Christ assured Lorna of God's infinite love, giving her conviction in prayer. Believing in the risen Christ led Edith Cavell to live out the tenets of the Sermon on the Mount: loving her enemy, living with compassion,

being the Good Samaritan, risking her life for others. Believing in the risen Christ gave hope to Bruce at the end of life. A housewife, a business man, an addict, a nurse, a teacher... and a fisherman. Ordinary people. But what they all had in common was that—each in their own way—looked into the empty tomb and, like the apostle John, believed. And that belief made a difference. It made a difference in their own lives. It made a difference to the lives of those around them. And as I tell these stories I'm sure you can see that they've made a difference in my life.

But you are no different either. We are all here because each of us has looked into the empty tomb and we can no longer remain the same. As we praise God here this day we express our thanks for how Christ has changed us... and continues to change us. For it takes a lifetime to realize the full impact of that insight... it takes a lifetime to be transformed by the One who gave all for us... and rose for us... and lives for us.

For it is as Isaac Watts put it in his marvelous hymn:

Were the whole realm of nature mine  
That were an offering far too small  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.