

(Easter) Today's Empty Tombs (Luke 24:1-6a)

An Easter sermon affirming that God continues to bring life out of death even today.

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[Notes: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we use to communicate with the media team.]

Way back in 1843, Charles Dickens published a short novel called "A Christmas Carol."

[slide: book cover from the original book if possible] As almost all of you know, Dickens's tale became one of the most popular stories in history. The book has never gone out of print. It's been made into an opera, a Broadway musical, numerous plays, and countless movies.

In case you've never read the original story, let me read you the opening lines. **[slide: (if possible, keep some of the book in the background): "MARLEY was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner ... Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail."]**

[I'll pause a moment, then END SLIDE] The Easter story begins in a very similar way. Jesus was dead. The Romans crucified him on a cross. Then his followers took down his dead, lifeless body and placed it in a tomb. In the words of Charles Dickens, Jesus was "dead as a door-nail." But then, three days later, on Easter morning, some of Jesus' followers went to the cemetery where he was buried. They walked to the tomb, expecting nothing but death. But when they arrived, the tomb was empty. **[slide of the empty tomb from The Garden Tomb in Israel]** Then they heard the most glorious news in all of human history, "He is not here, He is risen!"

Easter is all about an empty tomb. **[end slide]** So today, for the next few minutes, I'd like to share some stories with you about modern day empty tombs. All of these stories are about people I've known through the years. None of them live in Lebanon, but their stories are similar to many of our stories.

Her name was Jennifer. With a husband, three children and a part time job as an ER nurse, her life was busy but fulfilling. Then she noticed the lump. Next came the biopsy. Then the devastating news. Not only did she have cancer—but it had spread. The diagnosis was bleak, and the chemo and radiation treatment were bleaker. For awhile,

Jennifer was so sick she almost wanted to die—and feared she would. Like the early disciples, Jennifer made her own trip to the cemetery and came to the tomb. But after months of horrible treatment, Jennifer finally began feeling better. Over the next several months, and then years, the tests results were good. Five years later, when the doctor declared her cancer free—Jennifer wept like a baby with joy and gratitude. Jennifer walked to the tomb of cancer—*but the tomb was empty.*

His name was Charles. He was in the upper tier of management at a large corporation. But then the economy tanked and he lost his job. Charles tried to find a similar job for almost a year, but could not, and family finances got extremely strained. He finally found a job managing a small business. It's didn't pay nearly as well as his last job, but he enjoyed it a lot more. And most important, it allowed him to spend more time with his family, his church, and his community. On hindsight, the loss of his job actually ended up being a blessing. Charles walked to the tomb of unemployment—*but the tomb was empty.*

Her name was Mabel. She had been married to Roy for 50 years. But then, all of a sudden, Roy died of a heart attack. Her grief was overwhelming, and would not go away, and Mabel felt that her life was over. Slowly, however, Mabel came back from the dead. She began reconnecting to her friends, she did volunteer help at the local hospital, and she got heavily involved in the senior adult program at her church. Mabel still missed her husband, but her life was full again, and she was grateful to be alive. Mabel walked to the tomb of grief—*but the tomb was empty.*

His name was Richard. He can't remember when or even why he began drinking so much. But he now had a serious alcohol problem. Richard's wife finally gave him an ultimatum—get help, or the marriage was over. He went into rehab, and stayed sober for a few months, but then fell off the wagon. Soon thereafter, a good friend convinced him to begin attending an AA group that met at the local United Methodist church. It took a long time, and several setbacks, but Richard got sober and stayed sober and has been that way for almost a decade now. He and his wife are still married, and every Sunday morning they attend worship at the United Methodist church where Richard still attends AA meetings. Richard walked to the tomb of addiction—*but the tomb was empty.*

Her name was Sarah. She was 76 years old and dying. At first, the news of her impending death was devastating. Like all of us, she wanted some additional years. But as her family and friends rallied around her, and as she turned to her faith for strength, Sarah eventually made peace with her mortality. Although she was sad that the ride was almost over, she was also grateful for the years God gave her. And, she was extremely hopeful. Hopeful

that Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life, would carry her safely to the other side. Sarah walked to the tomb of death—*but the tomb was empty*.

If I had time today, I could tell you dozens of similar stories. Stories of people who walked to the tomb of divorce, or the tomb of depression, or the tomb of bankruptcy, or the tomb of betrayal, or the tomb of failure, or the tomb of guilt, or the tomb of shattered dreams. For awhile, these people thought their life was over. But in the end, with God's help, the tombs proved to be empty. Easter is all about an empty tomb. And the good news is that the God of Easter is still in the business of emptying tombs, still in the business of resurrection, still in the business of bringing life out of death—all kinds of death.

Twelve years ago I made a trip to Israel, **[slide: photo of Jerusalem]** what we call the Holy Land. My group, which was a group of ministers, went to see many important places. For example, we went to **[slide: photo of the Sea of Galilee]** the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus taught and sometimes fished with his disciples. We also went to Bethlehem, **[slide: photo from Bethlehem]** where Jesus was born. We visited all kinds of places from the stories of the Bible. But the most sacred place we visited was the Garden Tomb, **[photo of empty Garden Tomb—same one you used earlier]** the place where they think Jesus was buried. And if it was not actually this tomb, it was a very similar one. I could tell you a lot of things about the Garden Tomb. For example, it's surrounded by beautiful plants and flowers. Right across from the tomb, there's a small amphitheatre, where groups can have a time of worship. My group celebrated Communion there. It's probably the most meaningful Communion service I've ever experienced. There are lots of other interesting things I could tell you about this sacred place. But really, there's only one thing you need to know about the Garden tomb. It's empty.