

## INTRODUCTION

We consider Easter and Christmas to be our two most important Christian holidays, but without Easter, we wouldn't even be celebrating Christmas!

A man from Minnesota traveled to Key West, Florida on business. His wife was going to fly down the next morning to join him for a few days of vacation. When the man arrived he discovered the hotel had several desktop computers in the lobby for guests to use to surf the net and send emails. He sat down and sent an email to his wife. The only problem was he got one letter wrong in the email address and instead of going to his wife; the email went instead to a pastor's wife who had recently buried her dearly departed husband. When the widow read the email, her family heard her scream and faint. The email said:

To: My loving wife.  
Subject: I've arrived.

You're probably surprised to hear from me, but they have computers here now. I see that everything has been prepared for your arrival tomorrow. Looking forward to seeing you then!

P.S. It sure is hot down here!

God has a message for you today, and He knows your exact address. He knows where you are; where you've been; and where you're going. God brought you here for a purpose today. He wants to have a personal relationship with you. He brought you here to show you that this isn't a religion that involves observing rituals and keeping rules. These people at Green Acres really act as if Jesus is alive and He is here right now. Guess what? He is!

Let's read the resurrection story found in John 20:1-8.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!' So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed."

John and Peter ran to the tomb and found it to be empty. John walked in and the Bible says he saw and believed. I want you to see what He saw, an empty tomb, and I want you to believe as well. I want to talk about "The Echo from the Empty Tomb."

We've all stood at places where we could shout, and the sound of our voice bounces off a flat wall or mountain and we hear it repeated. Do you know where we got our word echo? It comes

from Greek mythology. If you ever visit Paris I hope you'll visit the Louvre. If you do you can see this painting by Nicolas Poussin entitled, "Echo and Narcissus." In the story told by Ovid, Echo was a beautiful forest nymph, who was especially chatty. She got in trouble because she distracted the goddess Juno while Juno's husband, Jupiter, messed around with another goddess. Juno punished Echo by removing her ability to speak; she would henceforth only be able to repeat what she heard. Then Echo fell in love with the handsome Narcissus but she couldn't tell him. Meanwhile Narcissus fell in love with a reflection of himself. One legend has Narcissus falling in love with his twin sister. So whether it was Narcissus's sister (try saying that), or himself, he soon died pining away by unrequited love. And poor Echo is left to wander in the forests and canyons still repeating everything she hears. Of course, that's a myth and scientists tell us an echo is where sound waves are bounced back from a hard, smooth surface.

We always expect a natural echo to repeat exactly what we say. But the echo from the tomb is a supernatural echo. It's a miraculous echo. It doesn't always echo back what it hears. For instance, let's look at four words that still echo from the empty tomb.

### **1. SOME SHOUT, "HATE!" BUT THE TOMB ECHOES, "LOVE!"**

It's hard to imagine the hatred directed toward Jesus on the day He was crucified. In the hands of wicked men, He was beaten and tortured. The Bible says these men spit on him and plucked the beard from his face. They slammed a crown made of long thorns on his scalp. They used a cat-of-nine-tails to turn His back into a mass of bleeding tissue. They drove railroad spikes into His hands and feet. Every action shouted out, "We hate you!" But every reaction of Jesus demonstrated love. When Jesus gave His sermon on the mount He had said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:43-44)

Jesus wasn't surprised at the hostility He faced on the cross. He expected it. But He responded with love. In John 15 Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first...Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:18, 13)

And when you've been touched by God's love you no longer have any room in your heart for hatred. Johnny Lee Clary was a former pro wrestler named Johnny Angel. He was also the Imperial Wizard in the Oklahoma KKK. He hated black people. He especially hated a local black pastor named Wade Watts. He tried to get Wade to hate him, but Wade kept showing Johnny the love of God. They met at a local radio station for a debate and Wade walked up to Johnny and said, "Hello Mr. Clary. I'm pastor Wade Watts and I just want to say that God loves you and I love you too." He offered his hand to Johnny. The Klan taught that touching any non-white skin would pollute. But Johnny reflexively shook Wade's hand and then quickly wiped it off. Wade said, "And don't worry it doesn't come off." On that show Johnny used every kind of racial slur and hateful statement he could think of. But Wade said, "God bless you, Johnny, you can't do enough to me to make me hate you. I'm going to love you and to pray for you whether you like it or not." Johnny didn't know how to respond to that.

They stood outside his house in their robes, and Wade came out and said, "Boys, Halloween isn't until four weeks. Come on back toward the end of October."

The KKK burned a cross in the lot across from Wade's house and he came out and said, "Would you guys like some hot dogs and marshmallows to roast? You can wear that hood, but God loves you, Johnny." Eventually the KKK burned Wade's church. After the fire was controlled Johnny called Pastor Wade and tried to disguise his voice and said, "You'd better be afraid. We're coming for you next. You don't know who I am, but I know who you are." Wade said, "Johnny, thanks for calling me at a time like this. I want to pray for you. 'Lord, forgive Johnny for being so stupid.'" One day, 30 members of the KKK surrounded Pastor Wade at a restaurant. He was there with his family and Johnny said, "Wade, this restaurant is for whites ready. So whatever you do to that chicken on your plate, that's the same thing we're going to do to you." So Wade picked up the chicken and kissed it. The people in the restaurant were laughing and the KKK members had to go outside to laugh; they were bent over with laughter until their hoods came off.

Love always wins. Eventually Johnny Lee repudiated the Klan and joined a church. He has since become a preacher and he and Wade Watts often appear together to preach at the same church. The world shouts, "Hate!" but the tomb echoes, "Love!" in return.

The message of Easter is that God can turn hatred into love. They nailed Jesus to a cross and put him to death for treason and blasphemy. He stretched out his arms, and in so doing, he embraces you and me in a gesture that tells us very much about the love of God. Do you want to know how much God loves you? This much!

## **2. SOME SHOUT, "FAILURE!" BUT THE TOMB ECHOES, "FORGIVEN!"**

From an earthly standpoint, Jesus would have been considered a failure. He died at age 33, without really doing anything people would consider to be signs of success. He didn't own a home or a company. He was penniless. He'd never written a book. He was a teacher, but he never built a school. He was a healer, but he never built a hospital. From the world's standpoint, He was a failure, but Jesus came to forgive.

When Jesus was on the cross He spoke these powerful words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) But the Greek verb indicates He didn't just say it once. It literally says, "He KEPT saying, 'Father forgive them.'" Imagine when the soldier knelt to pound in the spike, Jesus said, "Father forgive them." When they lifted him up in to the sky He said, "Father forgive them." When they walked by and insulted Him, He said, "Father forgive them."

When it comes to keeping God's perfect law, we're all failures. Take Peter for an example. He was a leader of the disciples, but on the night Jesus was arrested, Peter deserted Jesus. Not only that, but Peter cursed like the fisherman he was and denied three times that he even knew Jesus. He must have felt like a complete failure. But Jesus had something for him that would change him: Forgiveness.

As Christians we often miss the powerful truth of the tomb. We focus on the cross and then the resurrection, but we think the burial time was only a three-day waiting period. But the Bible says something we have not buried with Jesus—our sins. Baptism is a symbol of this burial. And we say, "Buried with Him in baptism, we are raised to walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4) It was our "old person," the person we were before we came to Christ who died with Christ and was buried with Him.

There's a line from a great old hymn that has been rediscovered by Casting Crowns and other groups: "Living He loved me; Dying He saved me; Buried He carried my sins far away; Rising He justified freely forever; One day He's coming, Oh Glorious Day!"

### **3. SOME SHOUT, "DEAD!" BUT THE TOMB ECHOES "ALIVE!"**

Toward sundown on the day Jesus was crucified, the Jewish leaders didn't want the victims to hang on the cross on the Sabbath, which started at sunset. John 19:31 reveals this wasn't the weekly Sabbath, Saturday, but a special Passover Sabbath. So at the cross, the Jewish leaders wanted the victims killed so the special Passover Sabbath wouldn't be desecrated. The Roman soldiers took an iron mallet and broke the lower legs of the two thieves. With broken legs, the victims could no longer push up to breathe, so they soon suffocated.

But when the soldiers came to Jesus He was already dead. To certify He was dead, they thrust a spear under His ribcage and pierced the pericardial sac, causing water and blood to flow out of His side. It was the job of the Roman centurion to certify death, like a medical examiner does today. It was official; Jesus was dead.

I'm sure the Jewish officials wiped their hands and said, "He's dead. Problem solved." I'm sure the devil laughed with glee saying, "He's dead!" But when the world shouts, "Dead" God can echo alive.

The Bible says on Sunday morning the women arrived at the tomb and saw an angel. "In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!'" (Luke 24:5-6)

This planet is littered with the graves and tombs of millions of people—some are famous tombs, but the majority is obscure. The pyramids in Egypt are really tombs, the Taj Mahal in India is a mausoleum, and the Ming Dynasty emperors are buried in massive tombs, with each complex covering almost 100 acres. Go to the tombs of religious teachers and call roll: Mohammed? "Here." Buddha? "Here." Moses? "Here." Confucius? "Here." Jesus? (silence) Jesus? All we hear is the echo from an empty tomb.

Even if you're a skeptic, you've got to answer the question: What happened to the body of Jesus?

From the start, the followers of Jesus claimed He was alive. He wasn't just alive in their memories or in their hearts—they claimed that a bodily resurrection of Jesus had happened. They claimed that they had seen Him with their eyes, touched Him with their hands, and heard Him with their ears.

Now suppose for a moment that this WAS a lie they just invented. What would have been the purpose of fabricating a story? If they were dishonest enough to promote a hoax then their motive must have been for personal gain. So what did they gain? Let me tell you. Stephen was stoned to death; James was thrown off the corner of the temple mount and then stoned. Bartholomew was skinned alive. Matthew was killed in Ethiopia. Mark was dragged through the streets until he was dead. James was beheaded. Jude was shot to death with arrows. Peter was crucified upside-down; and Paul was beheaded. Don't you think at least one of these "liars" would have confessed their plot in order to save their life? Of course! But all of them went to their deaths claiming the central truth of our gospel—that Jesus Christ died for our sins; was buried and after three days, God raised Him from the dead.

Have you read the latest statistics on death? Get ready to write this down: One out of one people dies. Death is inevitable, but the bigger question is: What happens to a person after they die? Many people insist this life is all there is, and the grave is the end. The resurrection of Jesus lets us know for certain the grave isn't the end.

A few years ago, a letter went out from the Greenville County, South Carolina, Department of Social Services. The letter was addressed to more than fifty former residents who had recently died. The letter said: "To whom it may concern: Your food stamps will be stopped effective immediately, because we have received notice that you passed away. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances."

Americans don't like to talk about death. We use words like, "He passed on." Obviously, that letter was a mistake, and some irate family members informed the government of their displeasure. But they weren't mistaken in their acknowledgment that death isn't the end.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, when we die, the world will write "dead" on our obituary, but the Word of God writes, "Alive" on it. At a cemetery holding her brother Lazarus Jesus spoke these words to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26) Do you believe this?

#### **4. SOME SHOUT, "HOPELESS!" BUT THE TOMB ECHOES, "HOPE!"**

In 1927, the US Navy lost the submarine S-4 after a collision with a Coast Guard cutter. The first divers to reach the crippled sub could hear a tapping sound from inside the sub. A crewmember was tapping Morse code, "Is there any hope?" Sadly, a connection wasn't made in time and all the sailors lost their lives. When we watch the evening news, or read the paper, we sometimes want to ask the same thing: "Is there any hope?" When we look at our family problems, our financial problems, and our physical problems we want to tap out, "Is there any hope?"

A person can live 40 days without food; 4 days without water; and about 8 minutes without air—but we can't live at all without HOPE!

And the resurrection of Jesus gives us hope both in this life and in the life to come. The Bible says, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith...If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!" (1 Corinthians 15:14, 19-20) "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." (Hebrews 6:19)

Through the years I've been asked why we have our Easter Sunrise service at Cathedral in the Pines Cemetery. Why don't we have it at the lake, or at a beautiful park? We start our Easter celebration in a cemetery because the first Easter discovery was made in a cemetery. A cemetery is sometimes a place of fear. That's why horror movies are set in cemeteries in the dead of night. But the resurrection of Jesus shines a million-watt bulb on the darkness of death and chases away the fear.

A cemetery is often a place of sadness and tears. Over the past 35 years I've stood beside hundreds of graves as weeping family members said good-bye to their loved ones. For some, a cemetery seems like the end—a place where hope is lost. But for Christians, it is a place of hope.

Paul wrote that, as Christians we grieve, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our tears are infused with a sense that death is not the end. We know that we will see Jesus and we will see our loved ones who die in the Lord.

Do you have hope? My simple acrostic for H.O.P.E. is Having Only Positive Expectations. The only way you can have HOPE, the only way you can Have Only Positive Expectations is by having a personal relationship with God through Jesus.

Hope is more than blind optimism. Hope is better than bland pessimism. An optimist sees the glass as half full. A pessimist sees the glass as half empty. But a person with hope sees the glass as firmly held in the hand of God. You don't have to worry about what the future holds if you know who holds your future.

## **CONCLUSION**

Not all scholars agree where the tomb of Jesus is located, but many reputable scholars believe the place where Jesus was buried is a place in Jerusalem called The Garden Tomb. When archeologists uncovered this place, they determined there was a large garden operating during the time of Jesus and they found an empty tomb. Searching for DNA, Scientists took samples from the tomb and determined there were no human remains ever present in this tomb. In other words, for there to be no evidence of human DNA found there, it would mean that either it was a tomb that was never used for that purpose, or it was a tomb that was new when Jesus was placed there, and, of course, His body didn't decay. This Garden tomb is located less than 100 yards from a rock cliff that even today looks like the face of a skull. The Bible verifies that the tomb of Jesus was in a garden and the very close to the place of crucifixion. John 19:41 says, "At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid."

I've had the privilege of taking groups to see Golgotha and the empty tomb for many years. I've been in the empty tomb dozens of times, so I don't ever go in anymore; it's empty, after all. So my job is to stand there and help people in and out. As each member of our group leaves the empty tomb, I say, "He is risen!" It's a moving experience and most of our members respond with quiet intensity, "He IS risen, indeed."

There are always other groups visiting this site. A couple of months ago when we finished visiting the empty tomb our group gathered about 100 feet away to have a worship time followed by a quiet, meditative Lord's Supper service. There was a group of African American Christians who were going into the empty tomb. I love the way our African American brothers and sisters worship with such fervency.

Now picture this: We're all solemn and quiet as I'm reading the Bible to our group. All of a sudden one of the African American men walked out of the tomb and shouted at the top of his lungs, "I got GOOD news! He ain't in dere!"

The people in his group started shouting and applauding and laughing with joy. That enthusiasm spread to our group and we found ourselves laughing, clapping, and shouting, "Hallelujah! He ain't in dere!"

That was the shout from the very first Easter morning. The angel said, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen!" (Luke 24:5-6) That shout from the empty tomb has echoed back for twenty centuries. Easter isn't just a time to be quiet and meditative it is a time to shout at the top of your lungs that Jesus is alive.

William Sangster was one of the England's greatest preachers during World War II. Late in his life he suffered from progressive muscular atrophy, and he lost the use of his voice. Two weeks before Sangster went to be with his Lord, he woke up on Easter and couldn't speak, but he could write. He wrote these words to his daughter: "It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout, 'He is risen!' But it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not WANT to shout, 'He is risen!'"

A natural echo may repeat a sound multiple times, but it gets fainter each time. But the echo from the empty tomb isn't getting quieter. It's getting stronger and louder with every Hallelujah. It's still echoing today!

If you believe Jesus is alive stand to your feet and shout after me: Jesus is alive! He lives! I hear the echo from the empty tomb! And I've got GOOD NEWS! He ain't in dere!

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes