

“EMPTY CROSS, EMPTY TOMB”

Matthew 28:1-10

Back in the 1880s, a couple of brothers called George and Weedon Grossmith published as a serial in *Punch* magazine their *Diary of a Nobody*. It was the precursor of such books as *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, *The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass* and *Bridget Jones' Diary*. The diary purported to be the journal of one Charles Pooter of The Laurels, Brickfield Terrace, Holloway, a low ranking clerk in the City of London. It's very funny and well worth reading (if you like that sort of thing). Mr Pooter has two neighbours who are constantly dropping in on him and his wife Carrie. One's called Gowing and one's called Cummings. At one point, as Gowing has just arrived and Cummings is just leaving, Pooter jokes that “*Gowing's always coming and Cummings' always going,*” a joke which falls flat and causes a great deal of offence.

But coming and going are at the heart of the Easter story, at least in Matthew's account, which we've just read, and that's where I'd like us to focus our thoughts for just a few minutes this joyful Easter morning – on three words which the angel spoke to the two Marys at the empty tomb, three words which lie at the very heart of our Christian experience, three words on which we base our faith and our message – “*Come ... then go*”. Those two women had first to **come** and find out for themselves what was going on, and then **go** and proclaim the news of what they had seen.

1. **“COME ...”**

Whenever we talk about the events of the Easter weekend, we must realise that the cross and the resurrection cannot be separated one from another. Within the context of our faith neither can stand alone and if we are to consider the events of Easter morning, we must first recognise what went on two days before on Good Friday. Firstly, we must come to the cross.

a) **To the cross**

If you look back to *Matthew 27:55,56*, you'll see that the two Marys had been at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. For them, the amazing happenings of Easter Sunday were made all the more remarkable by what they had seen a couple of days before. They had watched Jesus die in agony on the cross. They had heard the soldiers pronounce him dead. They knew that there was no possibility that he had simply fainted, or that there was some sleight of hand involved when his body was removed. It was at the cross that their experience of Easter had begun, and it's there that we, too, as followers of Jesus Christ, must begin.

i) **In humility**

We come to the cross initially in humility and repentance, looking up at the face of Christ, filled with love and wracked with pain. Many years ago, before the advent of hi-tech audio visual aids, but shortly after the pre-history of Flannelgraph, there was a Scripture Union soundstrip called *Number One* and Nick Butterworth's drawings for that managed to convey something of that mixture of compassion and agony, but there are very few pictures which do. I tried to find one on Google, but most pictures of Jesus on the cross have him with a beatific smile or a stoical stare – nothing that really comes close to expressing the suffering he must have been going through. (Jeremy Begbie's picture of a South American sculpture: Simon Bisley).

And as we stand there, we need to recognise that the pain, the suffering, the humiliation are all on account of our sin. In *Isaiah 53:6* we read that “*The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*” It is for your sin that Christ died and the only proper response to that realisation is humility and repentance. That's where you begin as you repent of those things that have grieved God in your life this week.

ii) **For forgiveness**

Forgiveness is to be found at the cross. As we've just said, through the pain shines love. As we realise that we need to repent, to be put right with God once again, so once more Jesus says to us, "*Come ... come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest*" (*Matthew 11:28,29*). Jesus gives us rest, gives us peace, enables us to be freed from the fear of punishment and the oppression of sin. As we come humbly to the foot of the cross, we can be assured of his forgiveness – God has promised that and he never goes back on his word (*1 John 1:8,9*).

If we are to have any impact on the world around us, if we want to make any impression on this community, then we have to get ourselves sorted out with God first. Paul uses the image of crucifixion when he writes to the Galatian Christians about this. In *Galatians 5:24* he writes of crucifying the sinful nature, dealing with it once and for all through the cross – and action which is **purposeful, painful and permanent**.

b) To the empty tomb

But then come from the cross to the empty tomb, as the two Marys did. There we discover the truths that, if you like, validate the Good Friday experience. For Jesus to have died, even with love in his eyes, would have made no real difference. Many great teachers and leaders had died, many of them with love in their eyes. But if that's where it ended, then there is no way we can be sure that Jesus would keep his promises to us, no way we could be sure of our forgiveness or of our status before God.

i) For assurance

This is the first benefit of coming to the empty tomb. Jesus Christ is risen! What he said was true. He has overcome not just sin, but also death, granting not only forgiveness but the prospect of eternal life. Indeed, if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, there is no substance to our gospel at all, nothing on which we can base our Christian experience. Look at what Paul writes in *1 Corinthians 15:12-19*. If Jesus isn't alive, we've been deluded. So we must come to the empty tomb for our assurance. But we also come for our power.

ii) For power

The empty tomb is a demonstration of God's power. Paul tells us that in *Romans 1:4* – the resurrection demonstrated with power that Jesus was God's Son. And that power is still available to us today. Again, it's Paul who makes that point in *1 Corinthians 6:14* – we are to be raised to life by God's power. Once Jesus was raised from the dead, so he was able to give us the gift of his Holy Spirit of power (*2 Timothy 1:7*), which would enable us as his followers to carry out the next, and equally vital, part of our text for this morning.

2. "... THEN GO"

Yes, we need to sort ourselves out at the foot of the cross and at the empty tomb – repeatedly coming back to those two places as we realise that we constantly need his forgiveness, his assurance and his power for our lives. But we cannot stay there forever. We are commanded to **go**, to take the message of Christ's death and resurrection out to a world which desperately needs to hear it. The women were told to "*go quickly*" to tell the other disciples of what they had seen and heard. And those disciples were told, in turn, to "*go and make disciples of all nations*" (*Matthew 28:19,20*).

It's so easy, isn't it, to want to stay, to be constantly coming back to the cross and the tomb, to get all the experience of Jesus that you can get, but you never actually get to go anywhere. You can spend all your time thrashing around in your guilt and need, or basking in the assurance of the Risen Lord Jesus, soaking up the power, and in the end never leaving those places to fulfil the second part of the command. And there are people who do just that – who are constantly at prayer meetings, Bible studies, missionary meetings, services, house groups, with the annual pilgrimages to the great Christian festivals at Keswick or Skegness or Brighton. Their entire lives are spent in such gatherings and within the safety of their little Christian friendship groups. There's nothing wrong with any of those things in and of themselves – in

fact, they're all useful and admirable things to be involved. But if you just move from one to the other, it becomes a kind of mobile Christian ghetto and you never ever get to connect with those people to whom Jesus Christ commands us to go. Always coming, but never going.

God has put us here in this community as his witnesses. Yes, of course we need each other and we need our regular church meetings (don't ever let anyone try to convince you that you don't!). We need our daily prayers and Bible study. We need the support and prayers and friendship of other Christians in church or in the workplace or wherever. That's all part of the coming. But we must not neglect the going, the getting amongst our neighbours, our colleagues, in the sports club, at the school gate, in the canteen, over the garden fence.

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had told his followers that they were going out "*as sheep amongst wolves*" (*Luke 10:3*), so there would be times when they would need to look back to the Easter event to sustain them and to motivate them. In *1 John 1:1-4*, we read how John, for example, looks back, as does Peter in his Pentecost sermon. As we follow Jesus' commands so we will begin to see how the two are inseparable.

Just as Good Friday and Easter Sunday are inseparable and make no sense without each other, so the coming to the cross and to the empty tomb cannot be separated from the going out into the world. The encounter with the crucified and risen Christ will compel us to go out and share the Good News of the Kingdom. The discipline and rigour of sharing that message will force us back time and time again to the cross and the tomb for forgiveness, assurance and power.

Christian faith is nonsense without mission, and mission is utterly futile without Christian faith. We need to recognise the need for both, to pray for God's help in getting the balance right, and to take the message of God's kingdom to every part of our little world, every part of our community.

(Discussion notes on the next page.)

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ii) For forgiveness

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2. "... THEN GO"

We cannot stay at the foot of the cross forever. We are commanded to **go**, to take the message of Christ's death and resurrection out to a world which desperately needs to hear it. The disciples were told to "*go and make disciples of all nations*" (*Matthew 28:19,20*). Christian faith is nonsense without mission, and mission is utterly futile without Christian faith. We need to recognise the need for both, to pray for God's help in getting the balance right, and to take the message of God's kingdom to every part of our little world, every part of our community.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you consider the cross or the empty tomb the focus of your faith? Why? Why do we need to believe in both Easter and Good Friday?
2. How can reflecting on Jesus' sacrifice help us in our Christian life?
3. What does Paul mean in his words to Timothy in *2 Timothy 1:7*?
4. In what ways can we "go"? Jesus said "*to the ends of the earth*". What does that mean for you personally?

5. What is the most powerful part of the Easter weekend for you?