

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: WEEK 1

**WISH I WAS THERE
AT THE EMPTY TOMB**
MATTHEW 28:1-8; JOHN 20:1-18
04/16/2017



MAIN POINT

Of all the Bible events we could have witnessed ourselves, this would be the most incredible to see.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Do you have a favorite Easter memory from the past? What made it so special?

What about this Easter? Is this season unique for you in any way? How?

Sometimes in life, it feels like we are sleepwalking. We tend to live on a treadmill thinking that the future will never be any different than the present. So, we just continue to muddle our way through our days. But Easter is a wake up call. When we think about Easter, we remember that Jesus isn't dead; He is alive today. Because He has power over death, He has the power to make us fully alive in every area of our lives. Imagine what it would have been like to see that empty tomb.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

How would you, in one sentence, describe the meaning of Easter to a non-Christian?

What are some of the implications meaningful to you right now because Jesus is risen?

Easter is about hope. The one hope that has held human beings across every continent and culture together for over two thousand years in the face of difficulty, hardship, suffering, and death itself is that Jesus was dead, but He is now alive.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 28:1-8.

Matthew had just told of the crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus (27:32-61). In the time since then, the Jewish authorities had the tomb guarded so the proof of Jesus' death—His lifeless body—would not disappear and allow His followers to make claims about a miraculous return to life (vv. 62-66). Then early Sunday morning, with the trauma of seeing Jesus executed still fresh and raw, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" encountered a "violent earthquake" and the startling appearance of a dazzling angel.

What emotions and thoughts do you think might have gone through the hearts and minds of these women?

Why would the angel have invited the women to “see the place where He lay”? What evidence of Jesus’ life and resurrection have you been pointed to at times you needed assurance of His goodness?

Why would the angel have told the women to “go quickly” to Jesus’ disciples with the news of His resurrection?

The two Marys came face to face with an angel, a rolled away stone, and a frozen guard. Can you imagine the scene? We would have seen the same thing if we had been at the empty tomb on Easter morning, and there is no telling what we would have felt. The first words out of the angel’s mouth were encouraging to Jesus’ friends—don’t be afraid, I know your situation, why you’re here. The resurrection means that every follower of Jesus can have courage and boldness in the face of our most trying times. We are not alone and have no need to fear. God is real, and He is more powerful than we can ever imagine.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JOHN 20:1-10.

What do these verses show us about the relationship Jesus had with His followers?

How were Peter and John’s responses once they get to the empty tomb different? What does this show about each disciple’s personality?

The Bible tells us that John went into the tomb and believed (v. 8). For John, it was that simple—a light bulb moment. A switch was flipped. From that point forward, John firmly believed Jesus was the Son of God. But for Mary and Peter, it wasn’t so cut and dry.

Have you had a light bulb moment in your relationship with Jesus? If so, what happened?

In your faith journey, have you been more like John, or Mary and Peter?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JOHN 20:11-18.

Why do you think Mary didn’t recognize Jesus? Have you ever been in a situation where it was difficult for you know that Jesus was with you?

Even though Mary didn’t know Jesus, Jesus still knew Mary. Even when we have trouble recognizing Jesus’ presence in tough times it doesn’t change the fact that He knows us inside and out. As Pete told us, that means right now Jesus knows not only your name, but your strengths, weaknesses, and everything you’ve ever done or will do.

Is the fact that Jesus knows you intimately comfortable or uncomfortable for you? Why?

Because Jesus already knows your past, it means nothing you’ve done is beyond His ability and willingness to forgive. Do you ever have trouble believing that? Why or why not?

Is God's grace difficult for you to believe in fully? Is there something from your past that is making it hard for you to believe and trust in the grace of God?

The moment you attach strings to grace it ceases to be grace. Even though it's hard sometimes to fully believe that God loves us as we are, Easter is a chance to remember that Jesus has fully paid the debt we owe because of our sin. Because He is alive, we can also be fully alive.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

If you could have seen the empty tomb for yourself, how do you think you would have reacted?

What situation in your life seems the most hopeless? How do you think Jesus wants to bring hope into that situation? How are you going to remind yourself in the middle of that situation that your hope isn't built on circumstances but on the living Jesus?

Is there anyone in your life right now who needs to hear a word of hope? What is the best way for you to offer that to them this week?

PRAY

Thank God for Jesus and the empty tomb. Thank Him that Jesus is the living hope of Easter. Pray that just as He brought life from death in His own body, He would bring life and hope to the specific situations your group mentioned.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 28:1-8

28:1. The Greek phrase translated as "after the Sabbath" refers to sundown on Saturday. In Mark, the Greek phrase refers to sunrise on Sunday. There is much confusion in the chronology of the last week of Jesus' life, especially events surrounding the resurrection. It is the mentioning of the term "dawning" that causes one to think that the reference may be to Roman time, not Jewish time. There are instances of both being used in the Gospels.

28:2. Two explanations for how the stone was removed are given side by side. There must have been two earthquakes: one at Jesus' death in 27:54, and another to remove the stone and allow Jesus' followers inside the empty tomb.

28:3-4. The angel at the tomb was wearing white linen cloth, a symbol of purity. Luke 24:4 and John 20:12 record two angels. This variation between one or two persons or angels is common among the Gospels. Other examples are: (1) the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26) and the two demoniacs (Matt. 8:28); and (2) the blind man (Mark 10:46; Luke 18:35) and two blind men (Matt. 20:30).

28:5. The words of the angel echo what Jesus told them in verse 10. It was the common statement when the supernatural realm broke into the natural (cf. Jesus' words in Matt. 14:27; 17:7; 28:10; Mark 6:50; Luke 5:10; 12:32; John 6:20; Rev. 1:17; and angels in Matt. 28:5; Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10).

28:6-7. The Father's acceptance and approval of the Son's words and works are expressed in two great events: Jesus' resurrection from the dead and His ascension to the Father's right hand. Jesus had told them He would meet them on a mountain in Galilee (cf. 26:32, 28:7, 10; 1 Cor. 15:6). This was a way to assert His resurrection and give them hope.

28:8-11. Jesus greeted them in His usual way. It came from a word that meant “rejoice.” Characteristically, Mark and Luke named one woman while Matthew named two. John 20:17 records only Mary taking hold of Jesus’ feet. This was the oriental way of showing submission, respect, and even worship. What a designation for these fearful disciples (cf. 12:15).

JOHN 20:1-18

20:1-2. We know from Matthew’s account that Mary Magdalene was not alone on this visit (see Matt. 28:1). If we follow the flow of Matthew’s text from 27:55 through the burial and resurrection, it would appear that “the other Mary” refers to Jesus’ mother who had already taken a secondary place before the resurrection. Startled, Mary ran to the disciples. John mentions Peter by name while implying he was the other recipient of this message. With no thought of a miraculous resurrection, Mary must have entertained all kinds of possibilities, none of which seemed to her a happy outcome.

20:3-5. This passage talks a lot about running. Mary ran back to the disciples. Although John made it sound as though they immediately dashed off to the tomb upon hearing her report, Luke gives a slightly different picture in Luke 24:11-12. All this is quite interesting since in first-century Palestinian culture, grown men did not run. John was certainly younger than Peter, and he may have been faster. He reached the tomb first and looked at the strips of linen. The text uses the same word for saw that appears in verse 1 describing Mary. Like Mary, John did not enter the tomb. We sense a certain hesitation and uncertainty, perhaps even fear.

20:6-7. Whether motivated by shame or just acting according to character, Peter plunged into the darkness. The text says that Peter saw what John had seen and in addition, the burial cloth. But the word changes to one with a slightly different meaning, perhaps best translated as “noticed” rather than “looked at.” Notice that the burial cloth was folded up by itself. This was obviously an intentional act on the part of someone.

20:8-9. Three of Jesus’ followers saw the empty tomb, but John was not finished with his report. He wanted his readers to know that after Peter entered the tomb, John himself finally found enough courage to follow him. Now we have yet another use of the English verb saw and yet a third Greek word appearing in the original text. This time John uses a word that means “to perceive with understanding.” That is why our text reads that John saw and believed. But lest readers of this Gospel get the wrong idea about the quality of the disciples’ faith at this point, John appended a parenthesis telling us that neither he nor the rest of the disciples yet understood the connection between scriptural prophecy and the resurrection. That would await Jesus’ post-resurrection teaching followed by the infilling with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

20:10-12. Here the primary witness was not Peter but Mary. Peter and John had left, but Mary stayed at the tomb and John offered this loving and passionate account of the first post-resurrection appearance of our Lord. Mary wept as we would over the loss of a dear friend. Then suddenly two angels appeared, and a fascinating conversation took place. We know from Luke’s record that Mary had been cured of demon possession (see Luke 8:2) and also had helped support the Lord financially. We must not confuse her with the prostitute of Luke 7 or with Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Empty tomb or not, her grief was unbearable—so deep that she could not take her eyes off the grave to perceive the living Lord.

No Bible reader is surprised to find angels at the empty tomb. From the birth of Jesus (see Luke 1:11,26) to the announcement of the Holy City (see Rev. 22:8-9) we find angels announcing God’s plan. They not only heralded the resurrection and showed up at the ascension; they even prophesied the second coming (see Acts 1:11).

20:13-14. John records that Mary saw Jesus. She noticed a person standing there, but she had no idea who it was. Many interpreters have wondered about this passage. How could she not recognize Jesus? She had experienced deep trauma; her eyes had filled with tears; it was still dark; she was very confused. But perhaps most important, she had not considered the resurrection a possibility. So the idea that she might be talking to a living Christ never occurred to her. She was looking for a body; she did not expect a resurrection.

20:15-16. Mary finally asked the person she thought to be the gardener where the body might be so she could retrieve it. Then Jesus spoke her name and tragedy turned to triumph. The early words of verse 16 remind us of John 10:4 where Jesus said that “his sheep know his voice.” This first appearance to a woman shows us the grace and openness of the gospel.

20:17-18. Many ideas have been put forth to explain the words, do not hold on to me. But such conjecture is unnecessary, since Jesus told us this statement was connected with His ascension. The people who love Jesus on earth—beginning with Mary—must learn to live without the physical support of His presence. Mary thus witnessed the

resurrection, and her first act upon leaving Jesus was a report to the disciples. It is difficult to know from John's account whether this report or the one in verse 2 was rejected by the disciples. But for whatever reason, the women who believed the reality of the empty tomb could not convince the other disciples what had happened.