

Come and See, then Go and Tell

[Matthew 28:1-7](#)

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

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EASTER - worship at 8:30, 10 and 11:30 a.m.

Let us pray. O Lord, you have now brought us to this place where we can affirm the power of your resurrection, the glory of your eternal presence. We ask, now, that you would help us to pause for a moment and to look deeply into the tomb that you left empty—that we might look into our own lives and see your resurrection there, even in our midst. And so we ask for your powerful Word to be present through your Holy Spirit and the love of God, your Father, and in your grace, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we pray. Amen.

Not long ago I was talking with a middle-age man who had been thinking a great deal recently about his grandfather, who died about 50 years ago. He remembered scenes, as a boy, with his grandpa on a ranch, where they were able to do many wonderful things that a young boy often enjoys doing: driving a tractor; operating a bulldozer; fishing in a lake; hiking in the mountains; harvesting barley; stacking hay, feeding the pigs; picking apples; milking the cows; riding the horses; and hunting the rabbits. His grandfather died when he was eleven years of age. He remembered only hints of the memorial service and glimpses of the motorcade to the gravesite. He recounted it as one of the few times that he ever saw his own father cry.

While immersed in these memories, he developed a passionate desire to go back and see that memorial park and to look at the grave where his grandfather was buried. Things around the memorial park, however, had changed over 50 years. An interstate highway now cut through the middle of the area; it was not only hard to find, but difficult to get there. A maze of twists and turns stymied navigation to this very important destination. And now there were two memorial parks—one west, and one east. Of course, he found the wrong one first.

When he found himself at the west site, a park attendant looked at him incredulously and sniped, “Was your granddad Catholic?” as if the man should have known this was the Roman Catholic park. “Well, you probably need to go to that other site, on the other side of the turnpike – that old site where the Protestants are buried.” And, as he solved the meandering labyrinth, driving under the interstate and winding around the foothills to get to the east site, wouldn’t you know it, there was no one there to tell him where he was buried; and no map of the gravesites, either. He spent the next hour scouring the whole graveyard, from one end to the other. He looked carefully at every marker for his grandpa’s name. But after awhile, he realized that time was running out. It was getting later in the afternoon, it was very hot, and the memorial park would soon close. He sped up the search, quickly passing by scores of markers; but after 50 years, he could not remember where he was buried. He ended his search frustrated, angry, and sad that his mission would not be completed.

But just when giving up hope to find the grave, a little voice within him whispered: “Why are you here? Why have you travelled all this way? Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He’s not here. He is one who had faith in Jesus. He is with the Risen Christ.”

Do you find yourself going back to the gravesite to be with your beloved spouse? child? a parent? or grandparent? or a friend who has died? I don’t know what it is about this time of year, but every year in the church, during and around Holy Week, it seems like the death rate rises. Many of us, because of that, are compelled, again, to look into the hospital, or the hospice bed; into the casket, or at the urn; into the fresh grave, columbarium, or memorial garden to see the dead body or the ashes of a beloved family member or friend. At that moment, we are confronted with the great mystery of life and death. Whether to deny or confirm the resurrection power for ourselves. We ask the questions: Where has our beloved friend or family member gone? Are they really dead? Are they alive in another place? It doesn’t seem right; and it doesn’t feel ‘real.’

This is why, I believe, the angel’s invitation to “come and see” is so captivating here, in this text. If we don’t come and see for ourselves... if we don’t take a serious look... we will continue to wonder whether the tomb is full, or empty. And that, in fact, is where too many of us, as human beings, live— in that murky, unknowing ambivalence: not looking... and not believing. If we do not look into the tomb, we will not know it is empty. But we hesitate to look because we fear that the tomb may not be empty. If it’s not empty, then our faith is empty. No resurrection; therefore, let’s not look.

If we are afraid to see death, we cannot truly understand the importance and power of the resurrection. A seeking faith traces Jesus’ life from his earthly time, all the way through to his real death. In your mind’s eye today, stop for a few moments—take a long look... a careful view into the tomb... and see if you can see the body. Linger at its dark mouth. Go into the tomb and discover the body is not there. If you see it’s empty, you must wrestle with the reality that the Christ, the Son of God, is risen from the dead.

I ask you today: What is dying in your life? Are you watching your body waste away? Are you seeing your marriage dissolve? Are you feeling your family falling apart? Are you watching your career disintegrate? And are you in the midst of denying... or experiencing the deeper grief and fear that goes with it? And what has already died in your life? Do you feel as though you are looking into the tomb of your dead job... a dead relationship... a dead expectation... a dead possibility... a dead end... a dead dream? Do you still see the dead body of your beloved in the casket?

But if you recognize, in these moments, that the tomb is empty, God wants you to see that things dead or dying in your life are no longer in control. Death is NOT the power that forces you to do what you do not want to do—because the God of resurrection is giving new life, and is sovereign over all life.

Because we fear death, we tend to avoid it. We want to reduce it, or trivialize it. We want to deny it. We’d rather not look in that

tomb, if we have a choice. In the early 1970's, the Pulitzer Prize winning psychiatrist and writer, Ernest Becker, was most noted for his breakthrough assessment of the human determination to deny death at all costs, even if our heroic efforts to deny death had to do with making evil in that denial. Becker first thought the answer to this massive denial was to be found in rational thought or scientific discovery. He asserted: humanity doesn't really want to look into the face of our mortality because we have no answer for it. And while he first rejected faith as a viable solution, he became disillusioned that science, in fact, had the answer. And in 1974, as he was dying of colon cancer at the age of 49, he became personally convinced that only faith, theology, and spirituality could adequately respond to the heroic attempts we make at denying death.

It's always amazing that those who would resist seeing the power of God in resurrection, consider and reconsider a different view when death faces them. As one of his disciples said,

Becker was finally forced to see there was a worm at the core of human nature—a frantic struggle within the breast of human beings, which would require, not simply a social scientific response, but a spiritual, and theological, and faith response.

If you think you can deal with death through just scientific and rational thought, greater minds than yours have gone down that cul-de-sac. The Gospel is not written as scientific proof for the Risen Christ. The Gospel is written as an invitation to faith—faith in the substance of things that we cannot see or prove by rational means. Faith is the leap we make to listen to the angel, seated on the top of that rolling stone that has been moved by an earthquake, so that we can see into the empty tomb: "He is not here. He has been raised from the dead." The Gospel invites us to go into our deepest fear—the temptation to deny death—in search of the ultimate answer to life. And there is risk in looking. What if the body is still there? What if the very invitation to look confirms our worst fear that the tomb is not empty, but the dead body is still there? It might be better not to look at all. It might be better to stay in denial... better that we had not come and seen...better that we had avoided the whole tragic scenario... better to go down the road of life in a romanticized indifference... better to hide behind our shaded glasses of sentimentality.

I recently heard about a young woman who was coming up on the anniversary of her mother's death. She was venting to a friend that no one in her family wanted to be with her, to talk with her about her mother's death. They all wanted to avoid it. So her friend invited her to come and stay with her on vacation — to be with the friend's family, so that they could spend time not being afraid to talk about her mom's death. They, in a sense, invited her to come over and to take a good look into the tomb.

"Come and see" is the invitation, by the messenger of God— to face the reality of death... feel the depth of the pain... and embrace the possibility of an empty tomb. But once we have come and seen that the tomb is empty, there is a second imperative of faith that the angel invites us to accomplish: Once we have come and seen, the angel says, we, too, must go and tell. But when you leave here today, don't glibly go out and invoke a happy tone of superficial gloss about resurrection unless you, too, are willing to face the mortality of your life and the death of Jesus. Only go and tell others, with fear and trembling, that you have looked squarely into the face of death and you believe that the tomb is empty. There is no room in the tomb for casualness or triviality. To confess "He is not here, he has been raised from the dead," demands the courage of facing death, as well as the deaths of those that you love— a willingness to have faith in the words of angels, and the mighty acts of God.

When we invite someone to talk about death and we listen to their grief, I believe we play a crucial role, like the angel, of inviting them to look into the tomb and discover it's empty. We invite them to look at death and open themselves vulnerably to the Good News of Jesus' resurrection. Providing a safe place for others to grieve and talk about death is the beginning of going and telling others that the tomb is empty. Lingering there, in the conversation and the pain of the moments, with people that are in grief, moves one to look, in faith, for a good God, who is with people in their sorrow and graciously raises people to eternal life. Too many of us want to 'go and tell' the Good News before we have stopped to stoop down and look into the tomb. First, come and see; then, go and tell.

There is no fulfillment to "coming and seeing" unless you are willing to "go and tell." This confronts a myth about many of us, as Presbyterians; we call it 'Presbyterian modesty'— we simply don't like that "e" word — evangelism. We'd rather stay in the closet of the empty tomb than go out and tell others about the resurrection of Jesus. Better to be a 'frozen chosen' than a passionate or fanatic advocate. But then there is no confirmation of our faith—that we have, indeed, looked into the face of death, to see the empty tomb— until we are able and willing to go tell somebody else. The coming and the seeing... the going and the telling... is all done by faith. If we believe... if we have faith... but we do not go and tell, we actually short-circuit the affirmation of faith in the Risen Christ. It is not just in the seeing or that hearing that we find faith, but in the confessing and telling, that we confirm it. Resurrection faith is not by sight and touch of the physical presence of a Risen Lord. It is by listening to the message and by telling others what we believe about the empty tomb and the Risen Christ.

This is one of the reasons, today, that we have stood together in this place and affirmed our faith in the Risen Lord by saying the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in Jesus Christ who was crucified, dead and buried... on the third day he was raised from the dead..." But hear me, Presbyterians, carefully about this: the confirmation needs to be more than public confession; it needs to be personal witness.

The two women, witnesses to the empty tomb, were to go together, and tell others—person-to-person, face-to-face. As you and I have been invited to come and see, we are also commanded to go and tell. To go and tell others what we have come to believe: that the tomb is empty and that the Christ is risen.

We go, knowing that God has spoken to us through his Holy Scripture, by the power of his Holy Spirit. We go, knowing by faith, that the urging of God's Spirit, that God, who created life, is more powerful than death; that God has the desire, will and ability to raise Jesus from the dead— and to raise each of us from the dead. We go and tell what we have come to see and believe. We tell our personal experience of the empty tomb, the angel, and the resurrection.

The tomb is empty. Our crucified Lord has been raised from the dead. Let us pray. O now, Lord Jesus Christ, as you have been lifted

up from death, as you have a new body and you have beckoned to us to follow in your footsteps, help us to have the courage to face the pain... and the hurt... the grief... the dieing'-ness' ... and the death. And help us then to have confidence that you will lead us through that, with others, into the power of your resurrection, forever. Amen.